

# Broccoli



by Maria R. Salazar

Photos: María with Mom, Raquel and with her Dad, Aurelio.

I sat across the table from Mrs. Blue Hair. Dressed in my slacks and white button-down shirt. Mrs. Blue Hair was an alum and the wife of one of the university trustees. She, along with all the big donors, were meeting that weekend at Willamette, a small liberal arts college known as the Harvard of the West. As student body vice-president, I was there to welcome the trustees to campus.

Everything in the room was a huge contrast to what I had known all my life.  
The silverware polished.  
The table linens white.  
The dining chairs cushioned.  
The food served to us.

I was self-conscious of my calloused earth-hands and was hoping that my hair was not so unruly that day. I managed NOT to freeze solid. I found comfort seeing my student advisor, J. Pai, at the other end of the table. She and I were the only people of color in the room. Everyone else was white, rich and very much at ease on the fifth floor of the university center that overlooked the huge, manicured lawn of the campus with a creek that ran down the yard; a creek guarded by Guido, the killer goose.

I managed to chit to chat with Mrs. Blue Hair about the concerts and lecture series scheduled for the fall. She seemed pleased to hear about all the “cultural programing” for students. She was especially excited to hear about the string concerts featuring Vivaldi. “I love hearing Vivaldi in the morning over my coffee and toast,” said Mrs. Blue Hair.

I thought about Ramon Ayala’s Puño de Tierra. The song I heard in the background when I spoke to my mother earlier that morning. Did Mrs. Blue Hair listen to Norteño music? Probably not.

Lunch was served on white plates with a gold border.  
Hot rolls and butter in a basket sat between Mrs. Blue Hair and me.  
How I wanted those rolls to be my mother’s tortillas with mantequilla.

Mrs. Blue Hair took a roll from the basket. As she spread butter on her roll, I noticed her shiny, diamond ring. Her dainty, thin hands were such a contrast to my grandma’s hands which were

wide, fleshy and always warm around my cheeks when she kissed me good-bye in a blessing. My Abuela’s hands were strong; able to lift 50 pound bags of frijoles just like that! The huge, gaudy diamond ring seem to weigh down Mrs. Blue Hair. I wondered, did Mrs. Blue Hair ever pray to La Virgencita? Did she know about La Virgen de Guadalupe?

Probably not. She was Lutheran. I knew that for some reason. I looked out the window, I could see Guido chasing Alfonso, my classmate across the bridge over the creek. “¡Correle, Alfonso! ¡Correle!” At that moment, I realized that I was thinking in Spanish and English.

I overheard Mrs. Blue Hair telling our server, who was wearing white gloves, that when dessert came, she would prefer “Earl Grey tea, not coffee.”

Were servers told to wear white gloves so that rich, white people didn’t have to see brown or black hands? Suddenly, I was very conscious of my calloused wide- hands. I kept them on my lap.

Mrs. Blue Hair smiled at me. So, different we were. I knew so much about her. I knew where she lived, where she was schooled, where she shopped, where she prayed. What did she know about me?

Lunch was served: Chicken Cordon Blue.  
I had never had it, but I liked it.  
Who doesn’t like blue cheese?  
Broccoli was served on the side.

I immediately thought of the rows and rows and rows of broccoli fields behind my Uncle Jesse’s home in Salinas, California. I could picture all the workers hunched over boxing the broccoli when it was ready to be picked. And I wondered, if our broccoli had come from those fields? Was this broccoli picked by my mother’s neighbor back home?

I could see Mrs. Gomez walking out of her apartment, with her lunch in one hand, in her long-sleeved shirt and the handkerchief wrapped around her face to keep the chemicals and sun off her caramel skin. The labor contractor’s bus for the workers stopped in front of my mother’s apartment building to pick up the workers and drive them to the fields owned by Del Monte

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Farms, a corporate farm. In my mind, I could see the bus, waiting there at the corner with the porta potty hitched to the back. Mrs. Gomez would board the bus and work El Broccee, as she called it. At the end of the day, Mrs. Gomez returned tired but would press on to make fideo y carnita for her three chavalitos. Her children attended school down the street. My mother would watch for them, making sure they arrived home. Did Mrs. Gomez clean and pick this broccoli for us? I wondered.

Mrs. Blue Hair pushed her broccoli to the side, wrinkling her nose, saying that it had been overcooked. Something about her hand with the gaudy ring pushing the broccoli away with such disdain offended me—offended me to the core.

It angered me, in fact.

I could feel my neck getting hot and turning red.

I wanted to say to her—“Do you have any idea how that piece of broccoli got to your plate?”

“Do you have any idea what it takes to get broccoli to your table all served up on white plates with gold trim next to the chicken cordon blue!?!?”

“Do you know anything? Do you know anything at all about broccoli!?!?!?”

My head was spinning with all the knowledge I had in my head.

I wanted to tell Mrs. Blue Hair...

“Do you realize that before you can grow broccoli, you must clear a field? You must till it.” I wanted to tell her that in the spring, when a new field is being prepared, men like my father, cut down wild weeds and thick brush with machetes. Then my daddy runs the field over with a blade hitched to a tractor to cut down the field some more. Once it is all cut down and cleared, Brown men like my father, with calloused hands and wide backs, walk the fields picking and tossing large rocks onto a flatbed. I wanted to tell her that my Uncle Nick was an Ox of a man, who still did this, even though he was over 60 years old and all gray!

I wanted to tell Mrs. Blue Hair that my cousin, who was lean and quick on his feet would lead a crew of 20 families to thin out the broccoli sprouts when they started to peak. I wanted to tell her that I could not thin broccoli sprouts for nothing! That my father grew frustrated with me when I could not grasp how to space out the new sprouts with my back hoe, and that is why I needed to go to college! “Mija, tienes que estudiar porque no la vas hacer en el labor.” My father grew so frustrated with me that he sent me to the truck to pass out water to the workers at



Photo: María working the broccoli fields as a girl.



Photo: María at Willamette College.



Photo: María reading her story at the book launch of *Las Nalgas de JLo* at the Esperanza, April 28, 2017.

break time.

I wanted to tell Mrs. Blue Hair about Mrs. Gomez and hundreds like her who walked the broccoli fields pulling and cutting out weeds every season. And that at harvest, women like Mrs. Gomez stood over a combine machine for hours and hours sorting out bad broccoli as it passed on a conveyer belt.

I wanted to tell Mrs. Blue hair about the boy who lost his arm because his arm got caught on the conveyer belt. Or about the Maldonado girls who got real sick one summer after spending a day working a field where pesticides were being sprayed from a small plane over an adjoining cabbage field. I wanted to tell Mrs. Blue Hair about the 17-year-old kid, Arnulfo, de Jalisco, who came to work for my father but broke his leg after the produce truck suddenly stopped and he fell. ¡Y así! ¡Las cajas de broccoli encima de él! All the boxes fell on top of him – his leg broken.

My head was spinning, with all this knowledge.

Did Mrs. Blue Hair know any of this? Did she know anything at all?

Her broccoli pushed to the side, and Mrs. Blue Hair looking down her nose. I grew more offended. I wanted to tell her...

“Do you realize that my mother worked in a freezer shed for hours packaging that broccoli? A freezer shed at 28 degrees! She stood for hours, packaging broccoli to be shipped to a local grocery store. Don’t push the broccoli away like that.”

I wanted to tell Mrs. Blue Hair that my Tia Delia worked in a packing shed, too. She would get to work at five in the morning to take the crates off the trucks and package the broccoli for local delivery. I wanted to tell her that my Uncle David, in turn, would load broccoli onto a produce truck and drive all over the northwest delivering produce.

Did Mrs. Blue Hair have any idea what it took to get the broccoli on her plate?

All this work, all these hands to get this little broccoli on her plate, and

Mrs. Blue Hair had the audacity to push it away because it was a little overcooked?

I wanted to yell at Mrs. Blue Hair,

“EAT YOUR DAMN BROCALLI!!!!!”

But I didn’t.

Instead, I sat there with all this knowledge. And realized just how much Mrs. Blue Hair didn’t know about me and that I knew so much.