

Our Food Story

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When we first initiated our community food assessment, I didn't realize the journey would take us through our intimate community history, force us to evaluate our values, reveal our vulnerabilities, and compel us to define, as much as we could, our identity in the near and far future.

I come from generations of Pueblo farmers. My fondest memories as a young girl were of harvest time. During harvest, the world was the most glorious with fresh corn, juicy watermelon, and graceful chili. During this time, my family was at its strongest. My grandmother is busy preparing fresh meals. My grandfather is happily devouring melons like candy. Rows of drying corn drape in front of screened windows like eyelashes. As a little girl during harvest season, I would watch my grandparents and aunts come together to husk tons of corn or wait anxiously for the two-day process of the roasting corn. It was those times that my family seemed the happiest. We were in abundance of food, family, laughter, history, and culture. More subtly, those were the times we were most thankful for the food produced by a combination of land, weather, and hard work and, in a special way, the land reflected its thankfulness to us by producing. When I watched the women sit and husk corn, that activity was one of the last breaths in a long conversation that occurs every generation and every harvest season.

One year during harvest, I noticed my eight-year-old nephew indifferent to the excitement. When I broached the subject of harvest, his reply was, "Why do we do all this work when we can buy better looking vegetables at the store? I like *Hot Cheetos* better anyway." As hard as I tried to respond to him by explaining the importance of participating as a family member in these harvest activities, I could not explain the intimate connections between Pueblo people, our food, and our land. I could not convince him of the relevance of farming. My nephew was but one kid in a whole generation of youth who are disconnected from the land and agriculture of previous generations of Pueblo people.

Presently, Pueblo children spend more time per day at school preparing for state-wide assessment tests, navigating iPads, and playing computer games than playing or being outside with their families. Food itself has changed drastically from the days of our grandparents when agriculture was the center of life. Food has become a passive activity in a large cafeteria with portioned lunch trays, a far cry from family-centered meals often typical of the Pueblo past. In contrast, our grandmothers and grandfathers spent much of their young lives in their family fields learning the ways of farming out of necessity. Today, Native farming, much like Native language, requires commitment and conscientious use in order to be sustained. And much like our Native Language, farming is the base on which our Pueblo identities are forged.

I have witnessed the gradual movement away from homegrown traditional crops (corn, beans, melons, watermelon, and so on) as central exchange items in cultural activities to

the packaged, processed items that are easily bought in bulk from warehouse stores. After all, as a matter of convenience and budget, a bulk bag of 24 small bags of potato chips are much easier to acquire, transport, and distribute than 24 ears of fresh corn grown months in advance. Despite the convenience and budget savings, I began to wonder what is the cost of opting for the bag of chips versus fresh corn? What comes with “the convenience?”

In 2010, I was a part of a small group of women who were mutually concerned about the health and well-being of our children and began discussions about how to encourage healthier lifestyles. This included, for example, finding ways to battle gang violence, adolescent diabetes, alcoholism, and drug abuse in our community. After much discussion, the women came to the conclusion that at the center of promoting healthy lifestyles was reclaiming our agricultural roots. So we embarked on our journey of “food reclamation.”

We began with a small survey that was distributed to the hundred or so households in our community. The survey asked general questions about income, diet, and food preferences. We disseminated the surveys at community health fairs, and offered incentives such as T-shirts and cupcakes for their completion. From our survey, we developed a community profile, which reflected several important findings about our community. It showed that our community had lower incomes than the national average, ate fewer vegetables than previous generations, and all families commuted to nearby towns (the closest being 30 miles) to buy their food exclusively from grocery stores. Few families maintained gardens or fields. The latter finding was especially worrisome because it pointed to an alarming outflow of economic resources that could remain in the community. To our surprise, the survey also revealed a community eager for traditional food crops and new young farmers.

Little did we know that this pilot survey was what the Sustainability Alliance of Southwest Colorado recommends and calls “a community food assessment.” A community food assessment is a community information gathering process that profiles a community’s food preferences, food availability, food waste, and develops a conscious plan about the community’s food future. It serves as the foundation for promoting and planning food system change for safe, nutritious, accessible and culturally meaningful food for a community. For us, it highlighted the desire to reclaim our Pueblo agricultural traditions and practices. It should be noted our survey was one of the first steps in completing a comprehensive food assessment. Other steps include research into past food practices and an analysis of present day food habits.

In seeking resources to develop and support Pueblo agricultural endeavors and programs, we were often directed to resources for “sustainable farming.” Yet, we were cognizant of the fact that “the word connects the world,” meaning that to maintain the integrity of our initiative we had to be selective in the way we describe it. For instance, “farming” reduces an entire Pueblo civilization, its life ways, and heritage to a single noun. “Subsistence” farming is referred to as farming enough food to feed the individual farmer’s family which is descriptive of Pueblo farming in its most naked definition. Neither term captures the strength and beauty of the spirituality, society, growth, culture, and sophisticated connections that cloth Pueblo farming practices. Neither term can capture the importance of food in relation to a community’s economic, social, and spiritual capital. Obviously, the

consumption of food is universally required, but the choice of food is highly related to our environment, social structures (relationships), and cultural preferences. Food tells the story of the community.

So what is the story of the Pueblo farmer? At its core, our land, our environment, our religion, our social system, our government system, and our economic system are tied in incredibly precise ways to our food. Our environment, our people, and our land are not seen as resources to be exhausted. Pueblo farmers have developed protocols to ensure our relationship with our environment is reciprocal. In short, Pueblo farmers are more than stewards of our lands, but for lack of a better term, they are relatives of the very land they work and of the food they produce. I wondered if my nephew knew about this relationship. If he didn't know, how do I teach it to him and other young people alike? How do we tell a whole generation of Pueblo children about the historical struggles our people faced in order to continue farming? More importantly, how do you teach a whole generation of young people to farm? Luckily, we only have to look to our grandparents for answers.

In most indigenous communities, food reveals the conflict, struggle, and resurrection of Indigenous communities and knowledge, and our fierce commitment to the children of our communities. In my Pueblo, food, specifically our traditional crops and the future contained in the dormant seeds, required the forethought and steadfast faithfulness of our grandfathers who challenged the US Army Corps of Engineers and the United States government after flooding from a poorly constructed dam ruined Cochiti farmlands for over 30 years. Our Grandmothers and Grandfathers fought for the opportunity for future Cochiti children to farm the lands of our ancestors, to learn Pueblo lifeways, and to ensure the continuum between generations was not broken by the loss of farmland. Although US land grabs and unjust land confiscation as it occurred in Cochiti regarding the dam seem to be confined to the 19th and 20th century of US/Indian relations, a new form of intellectual dispossession is occurring in the field of natural resources and in regards to the Indigenous knowledge of the natural world.

Although the food preferences of my eleven-year-old nephew are seemingly insignificant, his food tastes reflect the incredible influence of an artificial and pervasive culture that is reflected in manipulation from television and mass media. More importantly, it reflects attention averted away from a culturally based agricultural system. His food preferences are a far cry from the locally interdependent system that has maintained and sustained Pueblo people for generations. His choice to opt for chips rather than two-day roasted corn means his "taste palate" has become accustomed to the many synthetic chemicals that are now used in the creation of mass-produced food products, and in many ways is not a choice at all, but a the result of carefully crafted marketing. His choice is less of a nutritional crisis, but a wake-up call to a culture in need of renewal. In the same way our Pueblo ancestors cared for the plants in our fields, our children and their food are in need of maintenance and renewal.

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