Libradita Tafoya Esquibel with her youngest children and a granddaughter. Northern New Mexico, 1952

INTRODUCTION

The recovery of the people is tied to the recovery of food, since food itself is medicine, not only for the body, but for the soul, and for the spiritual connection.
—Winona LaDuke

In Catriona's Words

My father Alfonso describes growing up in rural, northern New Mexico in the 1940s and '50s. The family enjoyed a diverse diet ensured by the labor of his mother, Libradita Tafoya Esquibel. Her kitchen garden produced squash and other vegetables. She gathered wild greens and herbs and cooked seasonal Lenten dishes to accommodate the family's ritual abstinence from meat. She put up summer's fruit for winter eating. She made thick, bready white flour tortillas and raised baby chicks next to her stove every year to provide eggs and meat for her family. When my grandmother left her abusive marriage and went to live with her grown daughters in Colorado, my dad's world changed dramatically. Without my grandmother's unpaid labor to provide a healthy diet, my father and the remaining family members could afford only the cheapest, most easily prepared meals, most often canned foods. Eventually, my father's family migrated to Colorado, then Wyoming, and finally Los Angeles. Most of the members of my father's generation developed type 2 diabetes as adults.

When Luz and I started to get to know each other in 1995, food was always part of the scene: I brought my vegetarian pozole to Luz's potluck. The first "date dinner" I cooked for Luz was New Mexico Green

Chile Stew (p. 96). Those two, along with my red chile tofu enchiladas, were the only "from scratch" meals I knew how to make. After we moved in together in 1996, my sister emailed me her mother-in-law's recipe so we could cook homemade flour tortillas together. Our song was the classic "Sabor a Mí."

The next nine years took us all over the country, from Santa Cruz, California (where we met as graduate students), to Las Cruces, New Mexico (my first job, while Luz wrote a dissertation and trained to run a marathon), to Columbus, Ohio (Luz's first tenure-track gig). In Las Cruces, the summers were so hot that we had to learn new ways of cooking and eating. Luz would cook first thing in the morning and then chill the foods so we could have a cold salad for dinner. Pasta salad, rice salad, bean salad: we had a whole repertoire of recipe ideas that we could plan our shopping and meals around. In Ohio, we had the perfect little kitchen, set up so that I could play sous chef and chop on one side of the counter while Luz spun and sautéed and played master chef on the other side. In 2005, we moved back to northern California when we got our current jobs at Cal State East Bay and San Francisco State University, and we thought we could finally catch our breath, now that we were home again. One of the first things we did was buy a lemon tree. Luz planted it in a big pot, and we cared for it on our deck. The lemon tree was a symbol of our happy return to California.

The following spring, Luz was diagnosed with breast cancer, and our world changed dramatically. During chemo, Luz had absolutely no appetite and lost twenty pounds. My own eating became solitary and secretive. We were completely off-balance. My work colleagues got together and gifted us a year of organic grocery delivery, and Luz's colleagues brought us meals. One book that helped us a lot was Rebecca Katz's *One Bite at a Time*, not so much because it had recipes that became our favorites but because she gave us a way of thinking about food. Katz's recipes are built around F.A.S.S.: Fat, Acid, Salt, Sweet. She says those four flavors are what make food taste good. And so even if you can only stomach a tiny meal, those flavors need to be there. After Luz completed treatment, food was no longer something to be enjoyed; it was something to be feared, something that could bring back the cancer. That's why our garden and eventually our chickens, became so important to our food life: it was one small area where we had control. We knew the kind of lives our chickens had lived, and we saw them racing around happily in the yard. Luz learned square-foot gardening and permaculture food-matchmaking (tomatoes love basil, and strawberries love chives). Our neighbor across the backyard gave us a rue plant, *ruda*, for memory and for spiritual protection. He was a Holocaust survivor who had grown up on the Isle of Rhodes, and he grew hundreds of plants in pots, some of them breaking through the bottoms of their pots and setting roots into the

ground. He was always talking to Luz over the fence and sharing seeds he had collected.

In Mexican healing traditions there's a condition called *susto*, a fright, which startles the spirit from the body. One of the ways of treating this is to cover a person's body with soil, to reconnect them to the earth, to this life. For Luz, working in our garden turned out to be the treatment for the *susto* that settled in after the cancer diagnosis, and growing our own food brought us to realize that food can give life, bring strength. My *susto* was that my Luz would be taken away from me. I didn't want to have to be the strong one: I wanted to sing sobbing Mexican songs "*El sol sin luz nunca es sol / el mar sin agua no es mar / y yo sin ti no soy nada*" ("The sun without light is no sun / the sea without water is no sea / and I, without you, I am nothing"). My dad came to visit us and showed us how to break up and remove the concrete from our backyard so Luz could build more raised beds and expand the garden. I put in an irrigation system, we composted our chicken manure with our food waste, and made rich black soil. And we learned to live again in our bodies and on this earth.

There's a saying among cancer survivors that as they adjust to "the new normal," from being in crisis-mode to finding their way through every day, that they are at last able to move from buying only ripe bananas to being able to buy green bananas again. It's about trusting that they will be there for the fruit to ripen. Alongside our raised beds, Luz started tearing up more concrete and planted fruit trees. I wrote this poem:

love is in the garden
with the chickens
in the herb spiral
transplanting the lemon tree
setting down roots

In Luz's Words

In 2006, when I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I was stunned. I had been a vegetarian for fifteen years, and I considered myself to be very healthy. The entire year after diagnosis was consumed by treatment, surgery, chemotherapy, and emotion. Catriona became my caretaker, and she was a total trooper: She took me to appointments, took careful notes on what the cancer doctors told us, did the shopping, and cooked for me as best she could. Since I am the cook in our family, the whole world felt upside down. I was completely depleted. My spirit, usually strong, was barely there. With the diagnosis, time stopped as all my energy went to dealing with the treatments and to the basics of survival. Eventually, as I started to re-emerge, I turned to research to answer the questions that were racing through my mind: Why me? Where did I go wrong? What can I do to survive this?

Codex Osuna, folio 38 "Herb Gatherer"

My research led me to some interesting findings about breast cancer in Latina/o communities. First, I found that Mexico has some of the lowest rates of breast cancer in the world. Second, I found a study published in 2005 that looked at breast cancer rates among Latinas in the San Francisco Bay area where we lived. This study found that immigrant Latinas had significantly lower rates of breast cancer than US-born Latinas. Moreover, the longer Latina immigrants lived in the US, the higher their risk for developing breast cancer. Also, curiously, learning English was associated with a higher risk of breast cancer among the immigrant women. I started thinking about these findings and wondered what accounted for the differences. Something in the US and something about acculturating to US culture were likely contributing to these increased breast cancer rates. As I continued my research, I found that these statistics extended beyond breast cancer, and were also true for many other diseases and health concerns. And that's when a light went on for me. What if the diet of rural Mexico and Central America, a diet that is ancestral and plant-based (beans, corn, squash, wild greens, nopales [prickly pear cactus], fresh fruit, nuts, and seeds) was protecting folks from the diseases associated with life in the US, such as diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers?

With this new theory, we started to research the health benefits of certain ancestral Mexican and Central American foods. We started to evaluate Mesoamerican cuisine and quickly found that foods from the pre-Hispanic era (i.e., before colonization) were among the healthiest foods on the planet and that many of the less healthy aspects of Mesoamerican cuisine came about as a direct result of colonization—with the introduction of wheat, beef, cheese, cooking oils, and sugar. Before colonization, Mesoamerican food was steamed, grilled or cooked on a clay skillet known as a *comal*. Meat was eaten only in small quantities. Our ancestors gathered and ate wild herbs and greens. They cultivated hundreds of different varieties of beans, squash, and corn, not just the few varieties now available at most grocery stores. In terms of corn, in particular, our ancestors created a rich and sustaining cuisine that included yellow, white, red, blue, and black corn, made tamales (p. 143 for Butternut Squash & Roasted Green Chile Tamalitos), tacos (p. 133 for Hibiscus Flower Tacos), atoles (p. 103 for Healing Green Chileatole), tlacoyos (p. 138 for Tlacoyos con Nopales), and more.

Thus began our quest to decolonize our diet. First, we started eating simple foods: a fresh pot of beans! And then I learned how to make fresh corn tortillas from scratch. Ah! My spirit awoke. I recalled warm memories of these tastes and smells from childhood. We decided to raise our own chickens. I started a garden and found seeds for wild greens like *quelites* (lamb's quarters) and *verdolagas* (purslane). With the help of friends, we

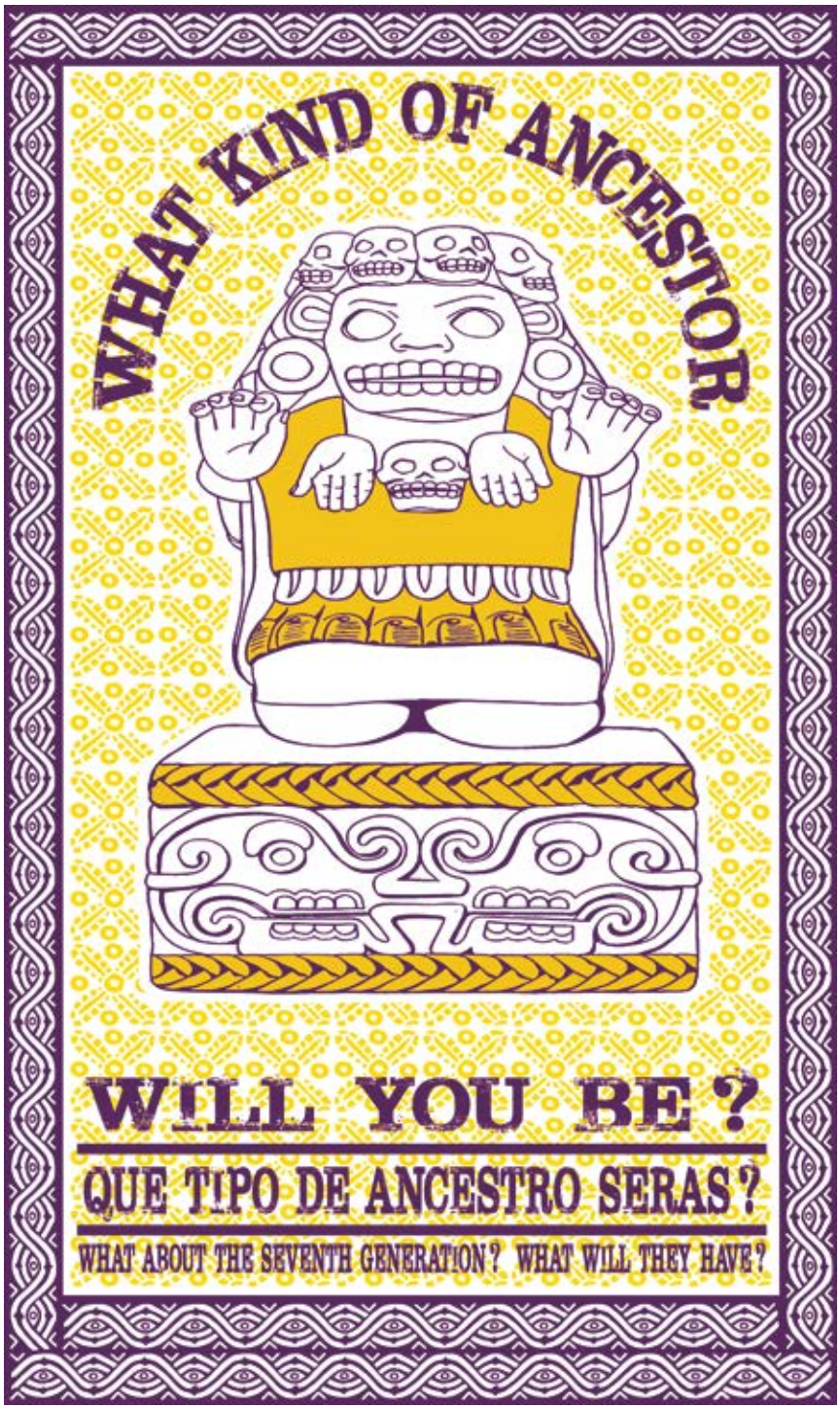
liberated paved spaces so that we could plant fruit trees. In the center of the garden, I constructed an herb spiral where I grow many herbs, including Mesoamerican species, like Mexican oregano, *pipicha (Porophyllum linaria) pápalo* (*Porophyllum ruderale)* and lemon verbena. The very act of clearing land, touching the soil with my bare hands, and planting seeds worked to re-ground my spirit. My first homemade taco *de quelites* was a revelation, connecting me to my grandmother Luz, who had spoken fondly of eating these wild greens in her native state of Sonora in northern Mexico. We worked for several years on (re)educating ourselves about these foods. I grew stronger, and Catriona was a willing participant in my garden and food experiments: tasting, offering encouragement and appreciation, and making sure the kitchen was clean and well stocked. Over time, my fear and anxiety about the cancer were replaced with gratitude (not about the cancer, not ever), but about our newfound connections to Mother Earth, to our ancestors, to ancestral knowledge, to our own spirits, and to the new post-cancer life Catriona and I were building together.

Recipes to Sustain Revolutionary Love

Our project was born out of both struggle and love, both personal and political. *Decolonize Your Diet* begins with the premise that we are living with the legacy of over 500 years of colonization of the Americas. Throughout the Americas, colonization meant the transfer of land from Native peoples to Europeans, the death of millions of indigenous people, rape of Native women, and the violent suppression of indigenous languages, religions, and cultures. We recognize the importance of indigenous knowledge, cultures, and ways of being in the world and believe in the need to dismantle colonial systems of power and knowledge.

For us, helping to build an awareness of the relationship between food and community offers one way to reclaim indigenous knowledge. We are writing a cookbook, but not just for individual cooks to read, or even cook from, while isolated in their kitchens. The project of decolonizing our diets cannot be accomplished through *individual* acts of food preparation. Instead, we hope that our project will inspire our readers to think critically about the effects of colonization on the food we eat and motivate them to get involved in their communities. We encourage our readers to act collectively to create a world in which everyone—from the residents of US urban food deserts, to farmworkers, to small farmers—has access to organic, wholesome, ancestral foods that are grown in ways that respect the delicate ecosystems of our planet.

Politically, as Chicanas/os, we believe it is important to stand in solidarity with our native brothers, sisters, and trans siblings across our continent. As citizens



◀ Orlando Arenas and Jesus Barraza, *What Kind of Ancestor Will You Be?*, 2013, screen print, 24" x 14.5". Reprinted courtesy of the artists

Florentine Codex, volume 5, chapter 4 "Woman Speaking a Blessing over Corn"

of the US and Canada, we understand that we have a responsibility to contest the immense power of US and Canadian governments and multinational corporations, who are wreaking havoc on native communities: displacing people, polluting lands and waterways, and threatening ancestral seeds. We are living in the midst of a huge battle waged by multinational corporations that aim to control the seed supply through seed patents and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). It is within these broader contexts that we issue the call to "decolonize your diet," with full knowledge that what we need is a dismantling of our entire food-for-profit system.

Another mission of this book is to encourage individuals in our communities to use food in order to regain physical health and nurture a spiritual connection to themselves, each other, and Mother Earth. When we say food is medicine, it is not because we think food can necessarily replace other conventional Western medical treatments, but because eating "real" food is essential to healing. Many of us have become disconnected from this truth and, therefore, from our own bodies.

Cooking a pot of beans from scratch is a revolutionary act that honors both our ancestors and future generations. We have learned from our First Nation (Iroquois) comrades the concept of honoring the seven generations that came before us and the seven generations that come after us. We believe that food is a nexus connecting the generations. These spiritual values speak to human physiology as well. The emerging field of epigenetics has found that the foods our grandparents ate and the toxins to which they were exposed can have a direct bearing on our own health. When Luz was interviewed for a study on Latina breast cancer, the researcher asked if Luz's grandparents had worked in the fields. (They had.) When Luz asked why that was relevant, the researcher explained that environment can change a person's genes and those genetic changes can be passed on to subsequent generations. In the case of farmworkers, exposure to pesticides and toxins may actually change the genes that are passed on. We believe that what you eat now, what you put in your body, can have genetic consequences for future generations.

For us, spirituality is about connecting each of us to our common humanity, to our ancestors, to our elders, to our youth, to our earth, and to a larger purpose. It is vital to honor and respect the cultural and spiritual aspects of food. We believe that humans, animals, and plants have spirits. When we eat, we connect to the spiritual essence of what we ingest. When we eat traditional foods, we connect to our ancestors. We think it is important to have gratitude for the food we eat as we are eating it—to be mindful of all the sacrifices

that went into having food on our table. Rather than disavowing the lives, the labor, and even the suffering that produce our food, we think it is important to acknowledge this complexity and be humbled by it. We hope that as we energize our bodies and spirits with wholesome food, we also energize ourselves to continue to struggle for decolonization and food justice.

We seek to honor and reclaim the healthy aspects of our complex histories and multiple cultures. As Chicanas/os, we acknowledge the cultural mixing that forms our identities, and we embrace the work of cultural theorist, poet, and activist Gloria Anzaldúa, who urges us to live in the borderlands—neither here nor there, but in the middle. In her influential poem, "To Live in the Borderlands Means You," Anzaldúa writes of being caught between and among various races, ethnicities, languages, and cultures while eating "whole wheat tortillas." Whole wheat tortillas are a healthy alternative to white flour tortillas, but flour tortillas themselves are a product of colonization: indigenous tortillas are made from corn. Like Anzaldúa, we combine and incorporate non-native foods if they further the goal of healing our bodies and spirits. Thus, you might see non-native ingredients like carrots, beets, and cilantro in some of our recipes. We even develop a whole-wheat tortilla recipe in honor of Anzaldúa.

In general, our recipes highlight the immense diversity of healthy, native foods in dishes that are accessible, yet satisfying. Reclaiming our vitality as a people means embracing a plant-based diet of whole foods. In our view, people can eat responsibly whether they are vegans, vegetarians, flexitarians, pescetarians, or omnivores. In a decolonial framework, there is room for multiple ways of eating, so we don't believe everyone needs to make the same food choices. We see the preparation of food as a creative act of resistance. While we are committed to reclaiming knowledge about our ancestral foods, including pre-contact food histories, we are not calling for a rejection of any food not native to the Americas, nor do we desire to recreate any one diet from a previous era. We understand that all cultures are living and evolving.

Decolonize Your Diet does not tout certain so-called "super foods"; instead, it is a whole food system of eating. Our *abuelitas* (grandmothers) prepared a simple diet that was as flavorful as it was nourishing. The staples of their diets were beans and tortillas, supplemented with many fruits and vegetables: avocados, corn, tomatoes, chiles, wild greens, squash, herbs, berries, pineapples, papayas, and more. They also had great knowledge of the medicinal value of their herbs and foods. So much of this knowledge is being lost, especially among those of us who have been in the US or away from the land

for generations. Many of our immigrant comrades—especially those who hail from rural areas in Mexico and Central America—still carry this vital knowledge. It is imperative that we validate and promote such knowledge and pass it down to future generations.

Anzaldúa ends her poem, "To survive in the Borderlands / you must live *sin fronteras* / be a crossroads." We share her advice to those of us who live in the borderlands, to retain our cultural identity, and to be "a crossroads"—a path for others to follow, a path toward health and strength. *Decolonize Your Diet* invites readers from diverse backgrounds to take up our call to bring playfulness and creativity to cooking, to search for healthy alternatives in more than one direction, to resist the acculturation that tells us white bread is food, and to share this message with your communities: *La comida es medicina*, food is medicine. We recognize that our book is only one step in this journey and that it provides only one small glimmer of the possibilities of a decolonized cuisine. We invite other chefs, writers, home cooks, bloggers, and activists to expand our project using the knowledge they collect from their own ancestors, regions, elders, communities, and ways of eating. We invite all our readers to use their creativity, taste, and historical memory to take our recipes and make them your own.