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Decolonize Your Diet: A Manifesto

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With our heart in our hands, and our hands in the soil...
—El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán¹

We see firsthand the effects of the Standard American Diet on our bodies and on the health of our family, students, and community members. We cannot fight for our people and our culture if we are sick and sluggish. It is time to reclaim our cultural inheritance and wean our bodies from sugary drinks, fast food, and donuts. Cooking a pot of beans from scratch is a micro-revolutionary act that honors our ancestors and the generations to come.

We call for food sovereignty for all peoples both in the US and globally. Food sovereignty would bring access to the healthy and sustainable foods our ancestors ate. We believe that *Madre Tierra*/Mother Earth provides for all. These should be our common inheritance: healthy soil; clean drinking water; wild foods, such as greens, mushrooms and berries; healthy streams and oceans filled with fish and marine life; and wild game. For millennia, humans lived in harmony with the natural world, taking care of the soil and harvesting plants and animals sustainably. Starting with colonization and continuing through the capitalist expansion, our collective ability to sustain ourselves and live in harmony with the cycles of nature is being destroyed.

We call on people of all ethnicities to connect with their elders now to recover the vital

cultural knowledge we need to survive. We need to reclaim our ancestors' wisdom. What foods did they eat? How was food prepared? What herbs and plants did they use for medicine? How did they conduct their ceremonies?

In order to decolonize our diet and reclaim our vitality as a people, we must return to a plant-based diet. We believe that people can eat responsibly as vegans, vegetarians, pescatarians, or omnivores. In our decolonial framework, there is room for multiple ways of eating, and we don't believe everyone needs to make the exact same food choices. As the Zapatistas have taught us: "*El mundo que queremos es uno donde quepan muchos mundos*"² (We want a world that fits many worlds). Instead of trying to impose one diet on everyone, we embrace a *rasquache* methodology. *Rasquachismo* is the art of making do and we embrace this artistic practice as a guiding principle. We see the preparation of food as a creative act of resistance.

We agree with Michael Pollan's call to "Eat food, mostly plants, not too much."³ We urge people to reject the Standard American Diet, which relies heavily on processed (fake) foods and factory farming. Instead, we call on people to reclaim land and space to grow real food for their communities. We believe that it is equally important to honor and respect the cultural and spiritual aspects of food. Ancestral food is powerful medicine that can help treat and cure diseases that result from overexposure to Western/US culture.

As Xican@s, our *abuelitas* prepared a simple diet that was as flavorful as it was satisfying. The staples of their diets were beans and tortillas, supplemented with many fruits and vegetables: avocado, corn, tomatoes, chiles, wild greens like *quelites* and *verdolagas*, pumpkins, squash, chocolate, vanilla, wild herbs, berries, pineapples, mangos and more. Before monoculture crops, our ancestors cultivated a great bio-diversity of foods. They cultivated hundreds if not thousands of different varieties of beans, squashes, chiles, and corn. Our ancestors also had great knowledge of the medicinal value of various 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 more recent 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 this immigrant knowledge and pass it down to the next generations. Public health researchers identify a so-called *immigrant paradox*: There are hundreds of articles in public health literature exploring how and why Mexican immigrants not only have longer life expectancies than US born Xican@s, but also live longer than middle class white Americans. This is paradoxical because poor populations usually have shorter life expectancies and more health problems, due to lack of access to health care, dangerous living and working conditions, and extreme social stressors. The traditional Mexican diet, along with immigrant cultural and spiritual practices, confers protection to Mexican immigrants, even though these immigrants face exceedingly difficult and racist social and economic conditions.

While we are committed to reclaiming knowledge about our ancestral foods, including pre-contact food history, we are not calling for any kind of "purist" ideology nor do we necessarily desire to entirely recreate a diet from a previous era. We understand that all cultures are living and evolving. We seek to honor and reclaim the healthy aspects of our complex histories and multiple cultures. As Xican@s, we acknowledge the cultural mixing

that forms our identities and we embrace Gloria Anzaldúa's call for a borderlands epistemology. In her epic poem, *to live in the borderlands means you*, Anzaldúa writes of her in-between subject position: "To live in the Borderlands means to/put *chile* in the borscht,/eat whole wheat *tortillas*."⁴ Like Anzaldúa, we combine and incorporate new foods with the goal of healing and nurturing our bodies.

As *promotoras*, we teach the dangers of the Standard American Diet, especially the devastating effects of GMOs, high fructose corn syrup, white flour, white sugar, factory-farmed meats, and other processed factory foods. Processed foods produce dependencies and addictions that sap our energy and our life force. We call instead for a diet based on fresh fruits, vegetables, beans, and healthy grains like nixtamal corn, quinoa, and amaranth.

Cooking a Pot of Beans is a Revolutionary Act

When we started talking to students about eating healthy, about cooking their own food, we realized we would have to start at the very beginning: cooking a pot of beans. We call this a revolutionary act, because it means taking control of your own eating. Cooking a pot of beans allows you to love and nurture your friends and family with life sustaining ancestral food while rejecting fast food and processed non-food-products.

For beginners, we suggest you invest in a slow cooker (crock pot). To save money, you can purchase these second-hand at the *pulga* or the *segunda*. Slow cookers enable you to cook your beans overnight or while you study, work, or protest in the streets. The process is simple. Ingredients:

- 1 lb. organic beans (you can use pinto, small red, black, tepary, or peruanos)
- 6 cups water
- 2 cloves garlic, smashed
- 1 onion, roughly chopped
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano (preferably Mexican oregano)
- Optional toppings: avocado, salsa

Directions:

Sort your beans. Sorting is done to take out any small pebbles that might have been packaged with the beans. In my experience, each pound of beans usually contains one small pebble, but some beans have more and some don't have any. I use a light colored plate and drop a handful of beans on top of it. I quickly look for a pebble, remove it if I find it, and then throw those beans into a colander or strainer, and reach for another handful. After the beans are sorted, rinse the beans several times with cold water. If you wish, you may soak your beans overnight. In the morning, add the beans to the crock-pot along with lots of cold water. Add an onion cut into quarters and a few cloves of garlic. You can also add some dried Mexican oregano, or regular oregano if you can't find the Mexican type. Herbs have many health-producing phytonutrients, in addition to adding flavor.

Cook your beans in the crock-pot. Each crock-pot is different but I usually set mine on the "high heat" setting. Beans take about 4-5 hours to cook but since the crock-pot gets started slowly, you may need to add a few hours to that. Once you use your crock-pot a few times, you'll have a better sense of how long it will take and you can plan accordingly. If you start your beans by mid-morning they will be done by dinnertime.

After the beans are cooked, salt the beans in the pot. Start with one teaspoonful of salt, stir into your beans and taste. Add one tsp. of salt at a time and then taste after each addition. Those cooking for folks with high blood pressure should try to add “just enough” salt to make the beans tasty. At this point, you can either serve them “de olla,” which is right out of the pot, or you can smash them and fry them in a bit of oil.

Enjoy your freshly cooked *frijolitos* with a warm corn tortilla. If you desire, you can serve your beans with a few slices of heart healthy avocado and some salsa. Don’t forget to say a blessing and give thanks to *Madre Tierra* and to the cosmos.

Our indigenous ancestors ate a bean-rich diet, which conferred many health benefits:

- Beans have more protein than most other vegetables, are full of energy-sustaining complex carbohydrates, folate and fiber and also provide good amounts of calcium, iron, magnesium and potassium.

- Due to the low glycemic index, beans have the unique ability to provide energy over a sustained period of time by being slowly released into your blood stream. Luz’s dad used to tell the family that the best breakfast was a bean burrito because “the beans will stick to your ribs all day.” He was right. This is high quality fuel.

- Beans are a great source of dietary fiber, which promotes a healthy digestive tract, helps lower blood cholesterol levels, and can reduce the risk of some types of cancer. Beans are an excellent source of protein, vitamins, minerals, and complex carbohydrates. Plus, they’re filling and satisfy the appetite.

- Eating a half—cup of beans per day can lower your cholesterol by 20 points.⁵

- Eating beans regularly can lower your risk of heart disease.^{6, 7}

- Latino youth who ate a cup of beans per day lowered their risk of diabetes.⁸

- Eat a diversity of beans (pinto, small red, black, tepary, peruanos, anasazi) for a variety of benefits. All beans have different properties. Recent studies show that the small red bean has more antioxidants than wild blueberries!

In our call to decolonize food, we aim to create mental, spiritual, and physical health in our communities so that we can collectively grow strong and healthy. We need healthy warriors who can effectively engage in the social and revolutionary struggle against the global economic elite, who maintain their control by keeping us sick, weak, and dependent.

For more recipes and tips, visit “Luz’s Decolonial Cooking Club” on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Luzs-Decolonial-Cooking-Club/115769351768139>

Endnotes

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