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Unpacking “Authentic” Recipes: Stories of Re(dis)covery and Retrieval from Ecuador

by Pilar Egüez Guevara, Ph.D.

SKIMMING through the pages of *Nourishing Traditions*, a best-selling cookbook that gathers traditional recipes from around the world, the recipe entitled “Ecuadorian Quinoa Casserole” caught my attention. Born and raised in Quito, Ecuador, I grew up eating the thick *sopa de quinua* (quinoa soup), a favorite nutritious choice of my mother. Inspired by the early twentieth century medical ethnographic studies of non-Western diets, the book’s author, Sally Fallon, promotes the nutritional value of traditional forms of cooking and eating and grounds this traditional knowledge in current scientific research. Fallon challenges the presumed effectiveness of the nutritional policy of the past fifty years in the United States by examining in particular the shift in the use of different kinds of fat in cooking. “Traditional” animal fats like butter and lard (as opposed to processed vegetable oils) were the fats elders used before the rise of the “obesity epidemic” in the United States. Just one example of this large genre of food writing, the book espouses a kind of traditionalist nutrition philosophy that calls for eating the foods consumed by strong and healthy people of the past and of the Global South.

It was an eye-opening moment for me to encounter a part of my cultural heritage on the pages of a book read by millions of U.S. Americans seeking (like me) to find a cure for modern chronic ills in ancestral culinary knowledges from Ecuador. It seemed that I had gone the long way around to find these food remedies, as my discovery came during the final stretch of my Ph.D. program in the U.S, five years after I arrived from Ecuador.

Reading into the recipe with more detail, I was intrigued by Fallon’s emphasis on the “authenticity” of the recipe:

“This authentic recipe from a chipper centenarian living in Ecuador, incorporates all the basic principles for easy digestion and thorough assimilation—use of rich stock made by boiling bones for a long time, presoaking of grain and the addition of cultured cream and home-made cheese, rich in fat-soluble vitamins.”^[i]

Speaking of authenticity, as a native reader, an obvious spelling mistake – a q in “Ecuador” – disappointed me. Moreover, the author’s insistence on the “propriety” with which the Ecuadorian *quinua* soup must be prepared to maximize health benefits made me wonder

about her authority to speak of propriety about a foreign cultural tradition.

Ever since I came to the U.S, I noticed the growing popularity of foods from “developing” countries increasingly being packaged for delivery in the homes of predominantly white, educated, middle-class people in the “developed” world. Furthermore, these foods – *quinua*, *panela* (noncentrifugal cane sugar), and chocolate – which are grown and eaten in Ecuador, were being marketed and promoted as disease-curing “superfoods.” Upon reading this fragment, I also realized that beyond the food itself, American authors are claiming that these foods require “proper” and “authentic” nutritional formulas of preparation from non-Western cultural traditions. These traditional nutrition formulas are now being valued and “packaged” in English, interestingly, through their verification in contemporary Western science.

It was frustrating to notice how traditional knowledge from the Global South trickled northwards, while Ecuadorians, like me, usually weren’t interested in learning to make *quinua* soup from our moms, dads, and grandparents. Particularly among the youngest in Ecuador, traditional culinary knowledges are generally devalued in favor of industrialized foods, techniques, and the lifestyles from “developed” nations. These foods and technologies often carry with them so-called “diseases of civilization” like diabetes, which is on the rise among children in Ecuador today. In an effort to reposition my role in this rather unfair system of food knowledge exchange, I embarked on a project with my friend, Alejandra Zambrano, to unpack and repackage our elders’ knowledges (*saberes*) about food and healing for fellow Ecuadorians. It seemed uncomplicated for us as Ecuadorians to recover this “authentic” knowledge from our aunts’, mothers’, and grandmothers’ kitchens. However, one question kept ringing in my head: Is there such thing as “authenticity” when it comes to food? Can this “authentic” knowledge and its healing properties be collected and packaged into easy-to-make Ecuadorian food recipes?

We began this journey of rediscovering our culinary heritage in the summer of 2012 in our respective families’ hometowns. The capital city of Quito and the Galapagos Islands are home to most of my older relatives, who migrated from their country hometowns in the dry highland region of Ecuador. Alejandra’s family lives in Bahía de Caráquez in the coastal province of



PREVIOUS: MY AUNT RENEÉ IN HER GARDEN AT HER HOME IN TUMBACO, NEAR QUITO, ECUADOR. PHOTO CREDIT: JESÚS MILIAN.
THIS PAGE: RETRIEVING RECIPES WITH LOLITA (DOLORES MUÑOZ ZAMBRANO, BAHÍA DE CARÁQUEZ, AGE 74). PHOTO CREDIT: ALISON CORBETT.



CAZUELA DE MARISCOS, SEAFOOD CASSEROLE BY LOLITA (DOLORES MUÑOZ ZAMBRANO, BAHÍA DE CARÁQUEZ, AGE 74). PHOTO CREDIT: ALISON CORBETT

Manabí. This is also the place where she has been training local high school students and U.S. college students on film production through her organization La Poderosa Media Project. We named our project *Comidas que Curan* (Foods that Heal), in which we joined efforts and expertise – anthropology and filmmaking – to produce ethnographic documentaries featuring elder women as culinary experts on traditional Ecuadorian dishes. In both locations, we interviewed and recorded cooking sessions with community members, including our aunts, parents, grandparents, and uncles. Through oral histories and in-depth interviews, we documented our elders’ memories of the everyday

meals they ate during their childhoods in Chone and Rocafuerte in the coastal province of Manabí, the Galápagos Islands, and Ambato and Pujilí in the central-northern highlands region near Quito.

Collecting recipes was the most challenging part of our project. For example, as I sat down with my aunt Reneé (Ambato, age 72) to write down her recipe for my favorite *hígado al jugo* (liver stew), this is how she explained it: “Marinate the livers and take off the veins. Let stand in wine, beer, lime, orange juice, or milk with abundant garlic and salt. If no children are around, also add ground pepper, cumin, and onions to get rid of the

stench of the livers. Put livers in a strainer to let the excess liquid out. To cook the liver, remove the marinade and place in a pot with red onions, tomatoes, the juice of one lime, and half a cup of water. Cook on low heat, covered. Pay attention as it might spill.”[ii]

After writing down the recipe, I was left with a feeling of incompleteness. It was the same feeling I had all those times when I called my aunt, long distance from the U.S, to ask her to explain how to make my favorite home dishes. “How many livers? How much wine, beer, lime juice, milk, onions, and tomatoes? How do I know when the livers are done?” Even after I

asked to specify the quantities (which were often given in measures like “a little bit of this” and “a handful of that”), thinking I finally had all the elements to put my research into practice, I was disappointed by the results. I could never make my U.S.-made, favorite home dishes taste the same as those of my aunt Reneé. I was always missing something.

The way of narrating recipes among the women I interviewed in Manabí was equally challenging for our collection purposes. Sometimes, it only took the women a few sentences to explain dishes as complicated as *cazuela* (seafood casserole), but they often omitted crucial details or “secrets,” thinking they were unimportant or obvious. We tried digging for more details verbally, but it didn’t take us very far. Only when we stood alongside them in the kitchen while they cooked, closely monitoring every step of the preparation, could we find out about some of these crucial steps.

For instance, it is a custom among people in Manabí to rub peeled green plantains with abundant lime juice before adding them to boiling water where they are cooked. This prevents the plantains from turning black and thereby blackening soups, sauces, and stews. These small but crucial details in the traditional preparation of dishes are obvious to the women who practice them every day at their kitchens, so they didn’t feel they needed to explain it to me. (Perhaps they assumed I would know because I am an Ecuadorian woman and they expect me to know how to cook). Being from the highlands region and therefore an outsider to the coastal culinary culture, I realized this knowledge is only available to those who have been in the kitchen – not just at the dinner table – of someone from Manabí. Thus, learning from oral or verbal sources like interviews or cookbooks will not get us far enough. Observation and experience are indispensable in the process of transmitting traditional culinary knowledge.

In fact, traditional food specialists, particularly those who are not school-educated, often do not learn to cook from books. Most of the women we interviewed, especially those from lower-class backgrounds, learned to cook as children in the kitchen with their mothers. Many of them never could, or will, write down these recipes. Even for the educated and better-off women who did learn from cookbooks, who wrote down recipes and even wrote their own cookbooks, the experiential portion of the learning process was crucial to mastering the art of cooking. [iii] In trying out the recipes countless times over the course of their lifetimes, these women also perfected the sensory skills needed to give the dish its distinctiveness, that “exact point of taste” which cannot be fully registered verbally. Somehow the authenticity – if there is one – can be found in these women’s sensory memories and palates, as well as in the palates of those who have been eating their homemade meals for many years. In the context of traditional gender arrangements where women are in charge of cooking, the men have always occupied a privileged position in the gustatory enjoyment of the distinctive tastes of traditional food made by women. For this reason, rather than focusing exclusively on the women, our research experience taught us that the men were key informants to our project of recipe retrieval. As researchers in a quest to rescue our culinary heritage, we expected to be able to organize culinary information in a somewhat orderly and systematic fashion. We soon realized that women do not narrate recipe preparation in an orderly fashion because their experience with food is centered primarily on cooking, as opposed to eating.

For example, it is habitual among my aunts and several women who demonstrated their cooking to us to take a long break after the dish is ready. The women cooks do not sit down with us to eat because cooking is mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausting; it also creates complex sensory

interferences, causing them to lose their appetites for the food they spent hours preparing.[iv] After a few interviews with older men, we noticed a huge difference in their food narrative styles. Not only were men’s narratives richer in their descriptions of the tastes, the ingredients, and the context in which the food was made (specific places, times of day, special occasions, etc.), they were also more systematic in recounting dishes from the time of their childhood which they hadn’t eaten in a long time—maybe even several decades. Thus, our research strategy from then on was to talk to the men first, then make a list of all possible dishes, and only afterwards talk to the women to find out about preparation methods for specific dishes. Retrieving recipes from men’s and women’s archives of sensory memory was challenging largely because improvisation and creativity are a vital part of the cooking process. Asking women to remember their cooking practices in an orderly fashion is like asking a jazz player to write down the melody of her last improvisation. In fact, a single recipe often produces a range of equally delicious and “authentic” versions of a dish.

For instance, every family in Ecuador prepares a single traditional dish like the *cazuela* (seafood casserole) differently. Traditional cooks may use slightly different methods and ingredients, all of which are equally delicious, properly prepared, and “authentic.” Even within a single family, the recipe varies. For instance, my grandmother’s plantain ball soup (*sopa de bolas de verde*) tastes different when compared to the one my aunt or my mom makes. Although they both learned from my grandmother as children, their recipe had other influences, either from friends, TV, cookbooks, or their own creative contributions.

Variation is possible even at the individual level. My grandmother’s plantain soup never turned out the exact same way twice. She worked with the ingredients she had

In trying out the recipes countless times over the course of their lifetimes, these women also perfected the sensory skills needed to give the dish its distinctiveness, that “exact point of taste” which cannot be fully registered verbally.

Somehow the authenticity – if there is one – can be found in these women’s sensory memories and palates, as well as in the palates of those who have been eating their homemade meals for many years.



IRRETRIEVABLE CULINARY KNOWLEDGE – THE HAYACAS DE PLACITA AT THE DOCK IN BAHÍA DE CARÁQUEZ. PHOTO CREDIT: JESÚS MILIAN

at hand, those that were affordable, and those that were in season. She was keen to emphasize that having all the best ingredients produced the best results, illustrated by her frequent utterance of the popular saying “*No cocina María sino la especiería*” (“It is not María who cooks, but the abundance of spices”). Nonetheless, these spices and ingredients weren’t always the same because food, like culture, is ever-changing and subject to innumerable and untraceable influences. Thus, the search for the origin of a recipe in its “pure” or “authentic” form seems like a project doomed to fail. In some cases, retrieving recipes in *any* form could be a failed project from the very beginning. For instance, it is common

for women and other family members to be secretive about family recipes they don’t want shared or (mis)used by people outside their family or cultural circle. A good example came up during the ethnographic food documentary seminar we taught to community members in Bahía de Caráquez this summer. [v] City residents of all ages participated in the seminar. The final class project was to research and shoot the preparation of a traditional dish from the region. One of the projects offered an example of the small but powerful acts of resistance by traditional cooks who refused to share their culinary knowledge. A group of students chose to shoot the preparation of the traditional *hayacas*, [vi] a kind

of *tamal* made of corn and wrapped in banana leaves. The students chose this recipe because, like almost everyone in Bahía, they are assiduous clients at the stall of “Placita,” an elder that sells these local delicacies known as the “*bayacas de Placita*” in reference to his nickname. The splendid *hayacas* are sold by this family business for fifty U.S. cents each. The students knew that these particular *hayacas* had a reputation to be some of the best in the region because of their unique taste and consistency. To their disappointment, the family refused to release the recipe or allow them to shoot its preparation in the kitchen. These expressions of resistance are reminiscent of ongoing conflicts over

bio-piracy among indigenous peoples in the Amazon, who fight legal battles against corporations seeking to patent and capitalize from traditional foods or remedies they have used for centuries.[vii] In this context, it is possible to understand the reluctance of peoples of the Global South to share knowledge about food or plants that they have used for centuries to nourish and heal themselves. Secrecy becomes a way to protect themselves from expropriation, as they know their shared knowledge and resources may later come back to them in a package with a price tag.

In addition to the methodological challenges of recipe collection, traditional dishes are nearly impossible to replicate because the social conditions in which these dishes were made are not the same as those of their times and places of origin and creation. For instance, my grandmother often called family favorite soups and stews (like the thick *quinua* casserole of Fallon’s book) “*laboriosos*” to mean that they were labor-intensive, time-consuming, and ingredient-dense. In fact, thinking of cooking one of these soups all by myself seems insane. My grandma was usually not alone when making these dishes: having five daughters and a few maids at the country farmhouse where she raised her family made healthy home-cooked family meals three or more times a day possible. These were the kinds of hierarchical gender and class arrangements within which “authentic” traditional dishes were created, and in which their distinctive tastes and health benefits were perceived and experienced. As such, replicating the original conditions in which these foods were once made may not be desirable for many people, especially women. Older people from Manabí refer to these transformations with repeated frustration. “Women today are lazy,” they said repeatedly. In Manabí, like at my grandma’s house in the country, the custom was to cook at least three, and up to six, freshly made meals per day. This required women to be almost permanently in the kitchen, all day long, every day of the week. By contrast, older people noted bitterly, women today prefer prepackaged foods and spices (as opposed to freshly ground), cooking fast meals, and worse, feeding their families leftovers (which were usually never more than a day old). Clearly women’s changing strategies of cooking and feeding were not driven by “laziness,” but by the heavier burden they bore after entering the formal labor market in the 1970s. Thus, although food industrialization may have taken a toll on good taste and good health, it did many women a favor—at least for a while.

These changing gender arrangements over time explain why I, like many women of my generation and social background in Ecuador, never learned to cook our grandmothers’ *quinua* soups. We were privileged to have parents with the means

to invest in our education as an avenue to a different ideal of female success; that of the educated, independent professional. I remember how my mom often kicked me out of the kitchen when I offered help, alleging that the kitchen was not my place. Instead, she would order me to go back to my books and study.

Later, I realized the need to learn these fundamental life skills for my health’s sake, although time and resources are not always available in the context of my new life in the United States. At this end of the globe, being able to cook time-intensive traditional meals, or even to cook any meal from scratch, becomes a privilege of those with the time and resources to spend making often expensive and time-consuming healthy home-cooked meals. [viii] Ironically, in Ecuador and Latin America, it is the women of popular classes who still cook these kinds of meals and often do it as a means of making a living. [ix] Thus, gender, class, and global hierarchies shape one’s ability to reproduce traditional food-making and receive its health benefits.

There are many other conditions specific to the culture and environment in the Global South, as well as to past historical moments, that influence the health benefits that traditional “superfoods” may or may not bring those of us living outside those contexts. For older people in Ecuador, table talks after meals were part of the experience surrounding traditional meals and the benefits it brought to both the emotions and to the body. Countless family stories told by the elders nourished the heart and mind, while giving the gut enough time to digest and assimilate the food.[x] Eating those same foods today may carry over past positive emotions and memories that bring about positive health outcomes among people uniquely connected to these foods through their heritage.

In sum, traditional food and food making exist beyond their strictly material or chemical properties. They exist within the specific contexts of social life, sensation, emotion, and experience in which they are made and consumed. As such, understanding cultural *saberes* about food and healing with conventional Western scientific methods might not always be possible: they are not contained in a single recipe or a set of recipes with defined quantities and observable results. The word *saberes* (an important concept within Latin American indigenous worldviews) highlights the plurality and complexity of ever-changing, diverse systems of knowledge and ideas about food, eating, and healing as older men and women in Ecuador use and remember them. For this reason, thoroughly understanding traditional food preparation and consumption requires long-term cultural immersion in the contexts where the people bearing these knowledges use and

experience them. For similar reasons, appropriating traditional foods and their health benefits may not always be possible or desirable: the secrets, the emotions, the sensations, and the social conditions that make these foods possible do not come in the package with the food or with a recipe. Next time you eat a bite of chocolate, quinoa, or any other proclaimed superfood shipped to your door in a package, take a pause to honor the complexity of the history, the immensity of the wisdom and the experiences of the people that may (or may not) be contained in that package ¡*A su salud y buen provecho!*

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