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# CULTIVATING *COMIDA:* PUSHING THE BORDERS OF FOOD, CULTURE, AND POLITICS

TERESA M. MARES

## Finding *comida* in our everyday lives

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As a professor, I am convinced that tinkering with a course syllabus is one of the best parts of the job. Each semester (admittedly, sometimes just a few days before it starts), redesigning the outline of required texts, assignments, and course expectations gives me a thrill that few other academic obligations do. This routine yet incredibly creative task allows me to stay up-to-date on the latest research, return to the classics, and consider what this generation of students *must know* about the anthropology of food. Over the course of ten years, from the time I was a graduate student to my current faculty position, I have had the pleasure of teaching various iterations of a class on Food and Culture. This class has ranged from a summer seminar of just 20 students to a large lecture of over 100, and from the University of Washington campus in urban Seattle to the University of

***Dr. Teresa Mares*** *is associate professor of anthropology at the University of Vermont. Her research focuses on the intersection of food and migration studies, and particularly how diets and foodways of Latino/a immigrants change as a result of migration. She is currently examining border politics and food access issues among Latino/a dairy workers in Vermont and is writing a book on this topic, entitled* The Other Border: Sustaining Farmworkers in the Dairy Industry, *under contract with University of California Press. Recent publications include "Navigating Gendered Labor and Local Food: A Tale of Working Mothers in Vermont," in* Food and Foodways, *and a co-authored chapter, "Eating Far From Home: Latino/a Workers and Food Access in Rural Vermont," forthcoming in* Food Across Borders: Production, Consumption, and Boundary Crossing in North America.

*Outside the classroom, Dr. Mares has led a number of community food projects. She is co-director of Huertas, a food security project for Latino/a dairy farmworkers connected to UVM Extension's Bridges to Health Program, and was previously co-director of the Food Justice Project for the Community Alliance for Global Justice in Seattle. She is devoted to experiential, transformative modes of teaching and has advised dozens of students who seek to make a difference in the contemporary food system. She can be reached at Teresa.Mares@uvm.edu.*

Vermont, located in a state where we joke that cows outnumber people. Across these differences of time and geography, the ever-changing developments in the international movements for food justice, food sovereignty, and local food systems have provided a compelling framework for contemplating the meaning of food and our relationship to it. From the time of Mary Douglas and Marvin Harris arguing over the symbolic and ecological foundations for the pork taboo in Islamic and Jewish traditions to considering how LGBTQ rights intersects with food politics, the academic treatment of food is rarely dull.

Despite the tremendous changes in food activism and scholarship, there is a piece that has found its way on to my Food and Culture syllabus for the past eight years, and I do not anticipate dropping it anytime soon. A somewhat obtuse yet passionately argued essay, "Re-embedding Food in Agriculture" by Gustavo Esteva, is an exceptional treatise on the linguistic, philosophical, and cultural dimensions of food and agriculture. More than 23 years since it was published, and 24 years since Esteva originally delivered it as a keynote address, its underlying message remains more relevant than ever. A warning against the dangers of "modernity," a celebration of indigenous resilience, a challenge to how we define plenty and scarcity—Esteva's essay seamlessly moves between past, present, and future. As a student inspired by the food justice movement, and now as a professor who remains inspired, if perhaps a bit less idealistic, this essay speaks to me in a way that is profound, grounded, and productively disorienting. Having argued its finer points for years with students and colleagues, it seemed only natural for it to inspire this column as well.

Esteva begins, "I don't know how to say what I want to say. It is something radically new. It has been said time and again for centuries. I am not trying to justify pouring old wine into new bottles, but instead to illustrate my perplexity and the very nature of the predicament I want to discuss here" (Esteva, 1994, p. 2). This predicament, which unfolds across the following pages in twists and turns, is never precisely named, but rather revolves around the deeper contours and complexities of development and social marginality. Esteva anchors his analysis of this predicament to food, including cooking practices in rural Oaxaca, Mexico, sharing food among kin and neighbors in the Dominican Republic, and the rejection of food aid in the El Tepito barrio of Mexico City following the 1985 earthquake. In these cases, all located in communities assumed to be mired in poverty, Esteva finds a relationship to food that is fundamentally distinct from what is pervasive in the so-called "industrial world."

While it may appear on first reading that Esteva is dividing the world into a too-neat binary of modern/traditional, with an underlying signification of modern=bad and traditional=good, this would be far too simplistic. Instead, he is encouraging readers, particularly those in the industrial world, to consider what we might learn from indigenous and other socially marginalized communities. Part of this learning comes by considering the very words we use for the food that sustains us. With respect to the socio-linguistic dimensions of food and agriculture, Esteva argues,

> We must reserve the word *alimento* for professional or institutional use. To eat, to care for *comida,* to generate it, to cook it, to eat it, to assimilate it: all these are activities that belong to non-modern men and women and are, in general, gendered activities.… *Alimentarse,* in contrast, is to purchase and consume *alimentos* (edible objects), designed by professionals or experts, while being produced and distributed through institutions. (Esteva, 1994, p. 5)

Sorrowful that *comida* is not directly translatable into English, Esteva uses this term to refer to the practices of creating, sharing, and eating food that are embedded in place and culture. He opposes this to the food systems and practices found in the industrialized world; "I am talking about a general and chronic condition of industrialized societies, where people must be fed and remain totally dependent on private or public institutional apparatuses that create lifelong addictions to food services, assumed as magnificent conquests of civilization" (1994, p. 6). Here, then, lies Esteva's central argument, that those of us in the industri-

alized world have lost our connection to *comida,* and that only through regenerating this connection might we reconnect to place and to one another.

Esteva links the idea of re-embedding food in agriculture to a postmodern ethos, or more appropriately an ethos against modernism. Still, he argues against romanticizing a distant past, instead pressing readers to look for current cases where individuals and communities are cultivating more resilient food systems. In so many ways, his points echo those put forth by my fellow JAFSCD columnist Monica White in her first column of "Freedom's Seeds," where she examines the history and current forms of urban agriculture in Detroit (White, 2017). Like White, Esteva underscores that food is a powerful basis for holistic forms of community revitalization, but he argues that that it doesn't stop there:

> Re-embedding food in agri-culture is not about crops, stewardship of the land or organic agriculture, even though all of that *is* included in the endeavor. It goes beyond the movement for a regenerative agriculture after the Green Revolution. It is about the way we live. And again, it is not about healthy food or improved consumption patterns, for ecological or economic reasons. It is about people, about recovering a sense of community, about creating new commons—in every urban or rural settlement. (p. 11)

While there is much to be concerned about in today's political and economic climate, I take heart in the fact that as they read Esteva's words, the majority of my students are enthusiastic to consider new forms of social life based on *comida*—and their role in cultivating them.

Each time I lead my students through Esteva's essay, we bring his analysis together with a consideration of the work that food activists are engaged in across the U.S. and abroad. From worker-led calls for economic justice to the hundreds of community gardens that are tended in urban and rural locations, my students and I agree that *comida is indeed present* in our society, even as powerful forces push us collectively closer and closer to a world where only *alimento* is possible. In the columns to follow, I will continue to explore the distinctions of *comida* and *alimento,* examining where they relate to the food movement more broadly, and to Latino/a communities more specifically. I will take us from the border of Vermont and Canada where I work with Mexican and Guatemalan farmworkers in the dairy industry, to places further afield. In doing so, I will push the borders of how we define our food, how we politicize our food, and how we understand food to be central to our cultures.

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