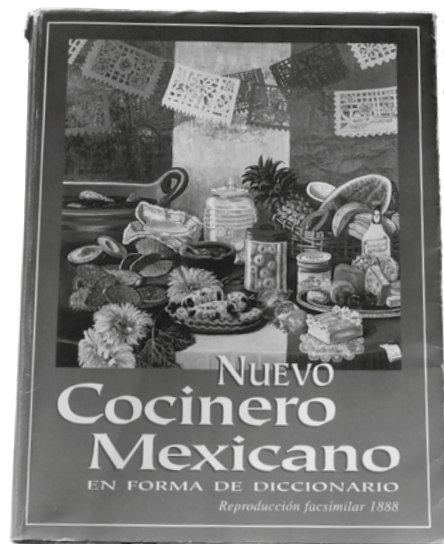


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Culinary Discourse: Nationalism vs. Violence

Introduction

Diet is one of the spheres that best shows us how a society operates and changes. That's why a recipe book is always full of discourses. Nothing in cookbooks is superficial, gratuitous, or innocent. Studying them is like a compass, a time capsule that helps us identify ways the connections between people and the food they consume develop and understand cultural behavior. They are exercises in literary prose, and we can find in them not only guides about how to cook, but also a variety of socio-political and cultural discourses that show us an entire contextual analysis. For example, the first cookbooks in Mexico were written with nationalist aims at a time when people were seeking independence. Almost two centuries later, cookbooks are being written to document acts of extreme violence, such as forced disappearance and gender-based violence.

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The few materials of this kind that exist until now attempt to dismantle hegemonic discourses that were implanted years ago, breaking with the canon and the notion people have about cookbooks. Therefore, in this article, the aim is to analyze how the argument has changed in cookbooks, mainly those created in Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century and the break in the discourse found in those of the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

About Nationalist Cuisine

The history of cookbooks in Mexico became relevant in the nineteenth century with the publication of the first ones, *El cocinero mexicano o colección de las mejores recetas para guisar al estilo mexicano* (The [Male] Mexican Cook, or a Collection of the Best Recipes for Cooking in the Mexican Style) and *El novísimo arte de cocina, ó Escelente colección de las mejores recetas* (The Newest Cuisine Art), both of which appeared in 1831. Researcher Sarah Bak-Geller argues

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that their aim was to create patriotic projects to build a nation, or what she calls “Mexicanness,” that is, the creation of an independent nation-state. Therefore, the first cookbooks were more nationalistic than merely cultural. In addition, their spread gave rise to a new genre of writing in Latin America: the recipe collection.

What these cookbooks attempted to determine was how to cook à la Mexicana, not how Mexicans eat. Although manuscripts did already exist of local recipes, they were private, created to be passed down from one generation to the next in families.

And here, it is important to observe that the first aims of *El cocinero Mexicano*, for example, were not to define the meaning of “Mexican cooking,” but to delight foreigners. Therefore, only a small section of the three-volume collection is dedicated to corn-based Mexican cooking, a minimal part compared to the rest of the recipes, among which French recipes abound.

Sarah Bak-Geller, one of the scholars who has most studied Mexico’s first cookbooks, mentions that it was French publishing houses, at the request of a Mexican bookseller, who first put ink to paper in the service of “Mexican cuisine.” *El cocinero mexicano* was published by the Galván printing house, the same firm that had produced similar projects such as *El periquillo sarniento* (The Mangy Parrot) (1816), by Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, considered the first Latin American novel, published during Mexico’s War of Independence. This confirmed that these printers were true patriots, concerned about the nation, as confirmed by the cookbook’s title.

Since the cookbooks were a product of a French publishing house, it was to be expected that the standardization of the recipes, the names of the dishes, and the design would be determined by this culture. That is, they would give a great deal of space to emphasizing European dishes and not Mexican food. It is curious that the French did not publish books about “French food” until after this

happened in Mexico. Thanks to this, the first recipe collections contain instructions to prepare the stew called *manchamanteles* (tablecloth stainer), but also mousse, canapés, pâtés, and fondues, authentically French dishes that over the years have become familiar in the repertoire of Mexican cooks.

Writing recipe books in our country also turned out to be a pedagogical exercise, in which the bourgeoisie participated with the aim of training true housewives. Before that, they targeted cooking experts, people familiar with the techniques, procedures, and handling of food-stuffs. The *Novísimo arte de cocina, ó Escelente colección de las mejores recetas* (1831) was conceived by people from the bourgeoisie, who wanted to train “Mexican young ladies.” This meant that, if a woman wanted to be a good wife in the nineteenth century, she had to know the best recipes, be able to cook them, and care for home and family.

It is interesting to see the differences in the discourse from one book to the next: one with a patriotic intent and the latter with the desire to train authentic women of society. This allows us to understand and study gender issues and social hierarchies, in addition to implicitly contributing to forming the social and national identity of both sexes: women, situated in the kitchen, and men, outside it.

For many years, these kinds of books were used to sustain and reinforce the national identity formed almost 200 years ago. The discourse worked: for the twentieth century, “Mexican food” was part of cultural history and the patriotic collective. This meant that to cook authentic Mexican food, people would have to take into account many gestures and kinds of knowledge and sensibilities that only a Mexican would know. For a large part of the twentieth century, publishing houses put out recipe books, which were roundly successful. In the second half of the century, the discourse changed, bringing the cuisine to all the social classes, not only the bourgeoisie, as had happened with the first 1831 books. By the end of the twentieth century, every home had its own collection of cookbooks for preparing all kinds of food: Chinese, French, Italian, and even, of course, Mexican.

Recipe Books and Violence

As the philosopher Valeria Campos Salvaterra says, today, thinking about food disinterestedly is a contradiction

and a potential cause of the deepest psychological wounds. It is by no means normal to link a cookbook to issues of violence. This is why those who venture into the recipe collection format are pioneers in a new genre of writing. That is because, since it was invented, it has never involved this aim or those topics among its contents. However, some materials have made it possible to observe a noteworthy break in the discourses. It would be quite precipitous to say that there is a great supply of them, but the new recipe books could create a sub-genre: recipe books in contexts of extreme violence.

The first material I happened upon a couple of years ago and that prompted me to do more research into it, was the *Recetario para la memoria* (Recipe Book for Memory), published in 2020 by photographer Zahara Gómez Lucini, and *Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte*, (The El Fuerte Women Trackers) which pays homage to disappeared people in Mexico.¹ The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance defines it as “the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law.”

The recipe book testifies to an act of violence so extensive and complex in the region as is disappearance. It

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contains recipes for sons and daughters, husbands, nephews, mothers, and sisters who were disappeared in the city of Los Mochis, Sinaloa. And they were all kinds of people: day laborers, record salesmen, itinerant salespersons, office workers, housewives, musicians...

The El Fuerte Women Trackers is a group of women seeking their relatives. The group was created after the disappearance of twenty-one-year-old Roberto Corrales Medina in 2014. His mother, Mirna Medina Quiñónez, looked for him for three years and found his body on July 14, 2017. She remembers Roberto through food, the “pizzadillas,” turnovers made with flour tortillas and beef. The book contains twenty-seven recipes, from the most complex like “pozole soup for Camilo” or “meat cooked in its own juice for Eduardo,” to the easiest like “hard-boiled eggs for Juan Octavio” or “flour tortillas with cheese for Brian Javier.”²

This book breaks with the canon of those who have placed an ideal of Mexicanness above everything else: in the *Recetario para la memoria*, for example, we will not find



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a recipe for *olla podrida* (rotten pot) stew that has been repeated in countless recipe books. Rather, what we find are such ordinary, everyday dishes like simple flour tortillas with cheese, which were the favorites of a person who is now disappeared and his favorite food survives as a symbol of ongoing struggle. It is also not written by professional chefs, nor does it seek to delight the best palates, much less teach young Mexican *señoritas* how to cook; it's a gastronomical compendium that operates as an exercise in recovering our memory, where the cooks are mothers cooking for their disappeared relatives.

In contrast with the first Mexican recipe books, which standardized ingredients so everyone could cook the dishes—1 kilo of beef, half a liter of lemon juice, 100 grams of bitter chocolate, for example—, in the *Recetario para la memoria*, the recipes are narrated by relatives. So, it is quite normal to see directions like, “You just boil the beans, and that’s it; you fry them in oil and smush them.” Undoubtedly, for anyone who isn’t familiar with how cooks speak in Mexico, it might be difficult to understand what is meant by “smush.” The *Recetario para la memoria* tries to talk about things that are difficult to name to remind us of the presence at the table of those who are no longer here.

Traditionally, in many Mexican homes, the kitchen is considered the place dominated by the woman, but also a space for oppression. Even though it may be a place for creativity, tradition, and cultural connection, it can also be a place where unequal gender roles are perpetuated. Assigning women the responsibility of cooking not only reinforces gender stereotypes but can also lead to an irregular distribution of housework and, in many cases, to situations of abuse and control. Recipe books, as bearers of culinary traditions, also reflect gender norms. In many cases, traditions are written from a biased perspective, in which the target audience continues to be made up of women, since people continue to assume that we are the ones who should be experts in the kitchen.

Approaching gender violence in that part of the home and in recipe books requires a multifaceted focus that deals both with deeply rooted cultural norms and the dynamics of uneven power. *Tinta de comal* (Ink on the Gridle), for example, is a cookbook written by women to put an end to those gaps. They cook as an act of resistance in a cultural space they were subjected to almost all their lives, which helped reformulate the conception that for centuries it had meant to them. Compared to the first rec-

ipe books targeting *señoritas*, this book has subtitles like “Women transforming themselves” and “Female recipe books, a legacy of love.”

Tinta y comal covers stories accompanied by recipes related to women who lived almost their entire lives subjected to kitchen work, naturally without pay. They preserve their recipes to leave them to their daughters and later their granddaughters. For them, cooking was not just putting a plate of food on the table, but a moment of reflection, of escape from their reality; for others, it was a form of providing and bestowing love. These women cooked, served, waited on, and cleared away for many reasons. Besides recipes, the book offers advice for each dish, measurements for better understanding and a photographic guide to help you to prepare better, for example, “Grandma Guille’s beans,” a particular take on typical *frijoles charros* (or the traditional “cowboy beans”). But you’ll also find stories about the lives of some of these women, like the kidnapping of Emilia, a senior citizen who was kidnapped by the man who became her husband when she was young. “I didn’t know him, and I didn’t love him, but I had to marry him because that was the custom then.”³

Conclusion

The aim here has been to identify kinds of recipe books that break with the idea of nationalism implemented in the first nineteenth-century cookbooks and to look at new proposals and discourses. Some works, like those mentioned above, seem to break with the idea of “Mexican cuisine” born with the first recipe books and that has remained in place for almost two hundred years. The new materials do not aim to shore up a national project to achieve the unification of society for patriotic ends. Rather, they seek to dialogue about issues like forced disappearance in Mexico and the break-up of gender gaps, two kinds of extreme violence. ■■■

Notes

- 1 See <https://recetarioparalamemoria.com>. [Editor’s Note.]
- 2 For more about the identity and work of this collective, go to <https://www.facebook.com/p/Las-Rastreadoras-del-Fuerte-100068388612386/>. [Editor’s Note.]
- 3 For more about *Tinta y comal*, see <https://www.instagram.com/marialuisa61215/reel/C93bzy8MUwW/?hl=en-gb>. [Editor’s Note.]