

KQED FOOD

What It Means to Decolonize Your Diet

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A dish made with nopales (*Tracey Kusiewicz/Foodie Photography*)

by *Savannah Kuang, CUESA Staff*



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also comes with painful colonial origins and a reminder of the atrocities indigenous peoples had to face, and still face to this day. Stories told about the first Thanksgiving **erase that history and cover up difficult truths.**

What the 'California Dream' Means to Indigenous Peoples

Is Beauty In The Eyes Of The Colonizer?

Thanksgiving also provides an opportunity to dismantle that narrative and decolonize the American tradition, which can be done through food, standing in solidarity with indigenous communities, and learning about the history that goes against the American mythos.

In their cookbook *Decolonize Your Diet: Plant-Based Mexican-American Recipes for Health and Healing*, Bay Area professors Luz Calvo and Catriona Rueda Esquibel reclaim the pre-colonial roots of Mexican cuisine, exploring indigenous traditions that are still kept alive today. They promote a plant-based diet rich in plants native to the Americas while embracing food as medicine.

We spoke with Luz about how our American food system has been colonized, how we can disrupt that system, and what we can do to honor and preserve the foodways of America's native and rightful inhabitants.



Bay Area professors Luz Calvo and Catriona Rueda Esquibel (*Tracey Kusiewicz/Foodie Photography*)

CUESA: Can you tell us a bit about your and Catriona’s backgrounds, and what inspired you to write this cookbook?

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Luz Calvo: Catriona and I are both Latinx and scholars of Latinx studies, and one side of both of our families are from Sonora, Mexico. But what really motivated us to write this cookbook was my breast cancer diagnosis in 2006. It was a big moment for me because I needed to figure out what constitutes healthy eating, but also what I should be eating. I did tons of research, and my findings on cancer-related diets were mostly based on the Mediterranean diet as a model for healthy eating, which wasn’t satisfying to me in terms of the food I grew up eating. So both of us started researching ancestral Mexican diets and food.

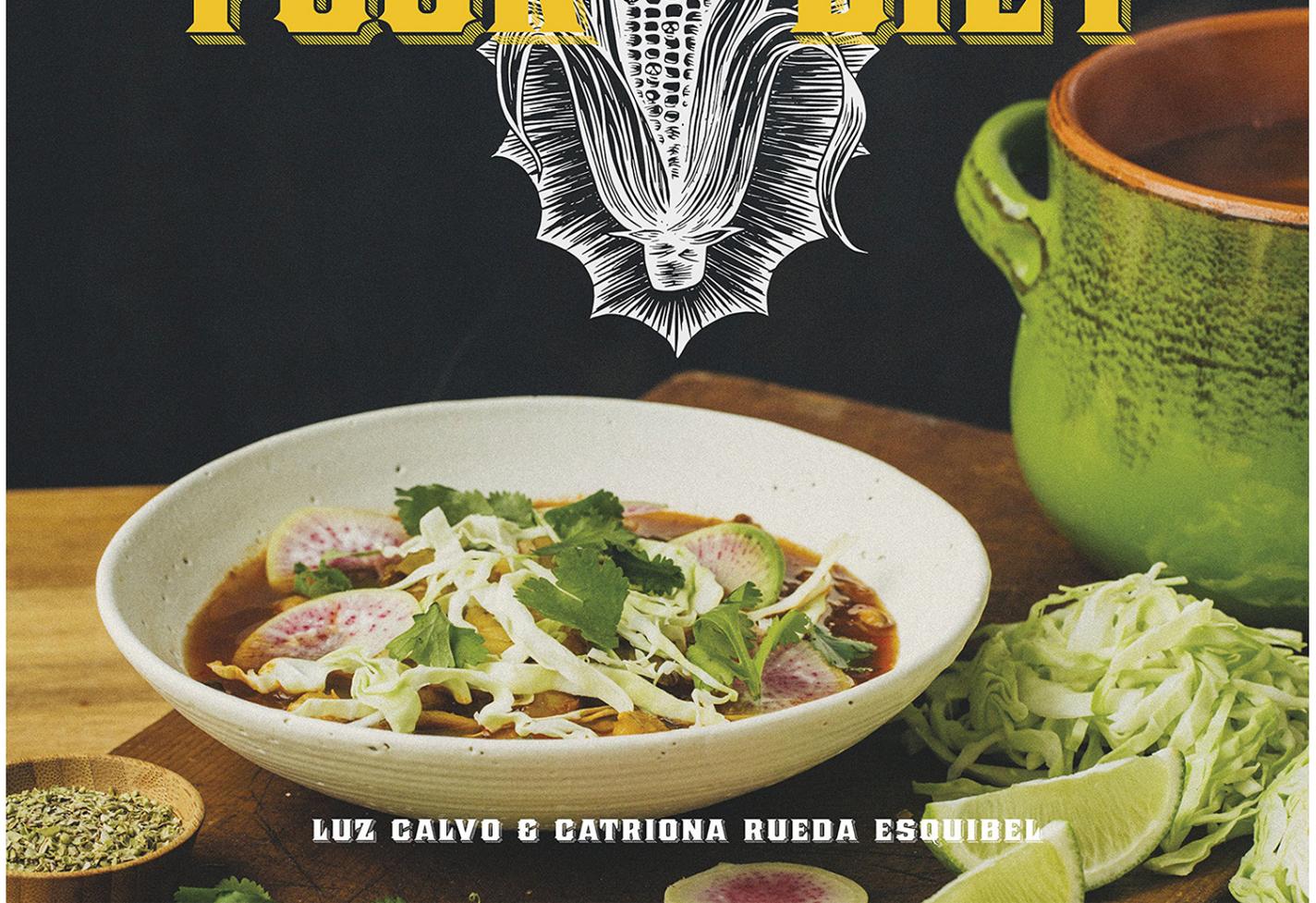
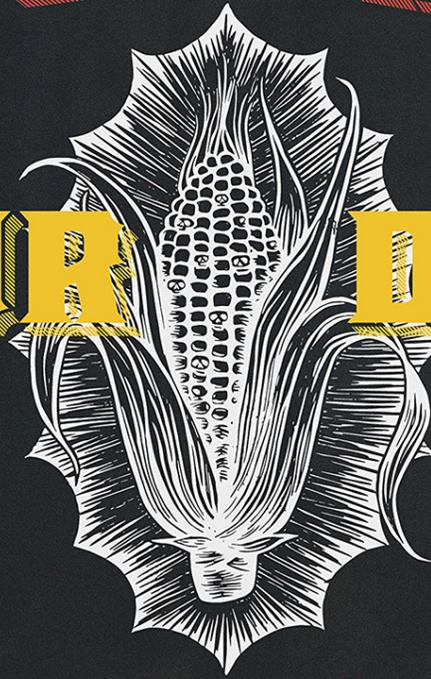
We found a **2005 San Francisco based study** that showed Latinx born in the United States have twice the risk of breast cancer compared to Latinx who were born in their home country. This flipped the switch for us because we started to wonder about why one group is impacted by this more than the other, and this turned into more questions. Dietary factors were briefly mentioned in the study, but it didn't explain why.

Then, we did more research and found a phenomenon called the Latina/o Immigrant Paradox, which is that overall, Latinx immigrants arrive in the United States a lot healthier, and throughout generations, they start to lose the health benefits they had when they arrived. With that in mind, it started to feel right to eat this way, and we dove deeper into this way of eating.

Plant-Based Mexican-American Recipes for Health and Healing

DECOLONIZE

YOUR DIET



LUZ CALVO & CATRIONA RUEDA ESQUIBEL

Decolonize Your Diet by Luz Calvo and Catriona Rueda Esquibel

How has the food system been colonized in the Americas?

When we looked at the foods of Mesoamerica, we looked at the healthiest foods that were grown by indigenous peoples for thousands of years and that continue to be grown today, such as beans, corn, squash, *quelites* (edible wild greens, specifically **lambquarters**), and

verdolagas (**purslane**). Most of this diet is plant-based. When the Spaniards came, they introduced meat such as pork and beef, as well as sugar. These types of food have historically caused many health problems. So, as a political statement and analysis, we wanted to draw attention to the multi-facets of colonization toward Chicanx/Latinx people.

Of course, there's also the colonization of the Southwest, which imposed the American diet on Mexican communities. At the turn of the century, Americans have tried to convince Mexican mothers to start feeding their kids sandwiches instead of tacos, and that white bread was better than corn tortillas.

When I think about decolonizing our diet, it's not just about health because our bodies are connected to the air, the water, and the food supply. We have to be thinking about bigger issues and focus on decolonization as a framework. Moreover, we have to acknowledge that farmworkers are also being exploited in the fields so that we can eat fresh vegetables, and the water is being polluted while indigenous peoples have been denied access to their land for ceremonies and growing their food.



When the Spaniards came, they introduced meat such as pork and beef, as well as sugar. (*Tracey Kusiewicz/Foodie Photography*)

What are some of the common misconceptions about Mexican food that you're addressing in your cookbook?

If you look at Mexican cuisine regionally and also throughout time, there have been infinite variations on every dish. For example, we like to talk about tamales. Here in the United States, especially California, there are particular varieties of tamales that have been considered “authentic.” But that’s not quite true. If you go to Mexico today, you can see so many different kinds of tamales that we have never heard of. Also, if you look at this historically, tamales were sold with a wide array of fillings, many of which were plant-based, sweet, or filled with animal meat that was hunted beforehand. There’s also that misconception where Mexican food is very meat- and cheese-based. It’s not that common for people to eat that way in Mexico.

What are some native ingredients available here in the Bay Area that folks may not be aware of?

There’s a huge lack of knowledge around these ingredients, such as tomatoes, squash, and corn. The assumption is that tomatoes originated in Italy, which isn’t true because the seeds are cultivated from here. You can also find squash in farmers markets with Italian names, when in fact they’re native to the Americas. I’ve also seen *verdolaga* (purslane) in farmers markets, which I think is cool to be reclaimed, as well as *quelites* (lambsquarters) and wild onions. Verdolaga tends to grow wild in the fields and has traditionally been a part of Mexican diets.



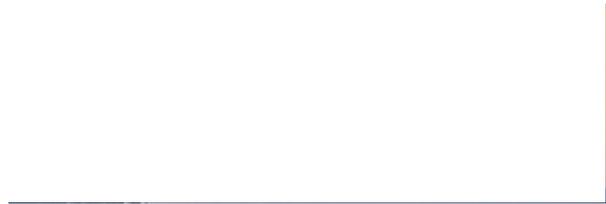
Edible wild greens (lambsquarters) (CUESA)

Thinking about Thanksgiving, a holiday rooted in America's colonial history, what are some ways we can start decolonizing what we eat?

One thing we always think about in terms of decolonization is the importance of having gratitude, offering blessings, and recognizing the labor that went into the food. Grounding ourselves in gratitude and appreciation as a daily practice can be vital toward food decolonization.

I also want to point out that we can take personal steps to decolonize how we eat, but I also think that we should take active stances of solidarity with indigenous peoples on this land. Learn about the food you're eating and the labor that made it possible for that food to come to your table. Because all of this is interconnected, we have to step up our engagement in political processes that are affecting us as humans and the planet. America has a complex colonial history, so we have to start becoming more aware of these issues in order to get there.

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*Find more tips in Luz Calvo and Catriona Rueda Esquibel's cookbook **Decolonize Your Diet**, and **learn more about foods that are native to the Americas.***



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