

Knowing “Good Food”: Immigrant Knowledge and the Racial Politics of Farmworker Food Insecurity

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Abstract: This article explores the ways that farmworkers, many of whom come from a culture deeply rooted in food and agricultural practices, cope with food insecurity by utilizing their agricultural and nutritional knowledge. Food assistance providers in the USA often treat farmworkers’ inability to afford healthy food as a lack of knowledge about healthy eating, reinforcing racialized assumptions that people of color don’t know “good” food. I argue that in contrast to food banks and low-income nutrition programs, home and community gardens provide spaces for retaining and highlighting agricultural, cultural, and dietary practices and knowledge. This paper investigates the linkages between workers’ place in the food system as both producers and consumers, simultaneously exploited for their labor, and creating coping strategies utilizing agrarian and culinary knowledge. I argue that food security and healthy eating, rather than being a matter of consumers making healthy “choices”, is a matter of class-based and racial differences in the food system.

Keywords: food insecurity, race and food, gardens, immigration, farm labor

Radical academics and activists have long recognized the fact that low-income people of color are often marginalized from accessing “healthy” food.¹² What is not commonly discussed is the ways in which people who cannot afford certain foods are assumed to also be devoid of nutritional and agricultural knowledge, further marginalizing them from decision-making concerning what constitutes healthy food. I argue that the programs and projects targeted at the food insecure population in California’s Northern Central Coast,³ who tend to be primarily non-white immigrant farmworkers, approach food insecurity with the assumption that a lack of understanding or education is the fundamental barrier to healthy eating.⁴ Education becomes the way to tackle the problem of food insecurity, rather than addressing income inequality, systemic discrimination, immigration status, or a general lack of resources and power. My research shows that the assumption that food-insecure people lack an understanding of “healthy” food choices is not accurate for many recent immigrants, and that such assumptions may actually work to undermine food assistance and food security work.⁵ Moreover, the focus on education rather than wealth or income, as a determinant of food access, masks existing class relations, distracting from the true cause of food insecurity.

I analyze the ways that programs working to address food insecurity often reinforce race and class-based notions of food consumption, arguing that food assistance programs take a deficiency of knowledge approach when addressing

food insecurity and food related health problems for immigrants in the region. I then contrast that approach with examples from immigrant gardening, exploring how these practices highlight immigrant nutritional and agricultural knowledge.

Ironically, many farmworkers in California, such as those interviewed for this research, are food insecure.⁶ Although many have experienced farming and gardening in their countries of origin, to make ends meet they depend on food assistance programs, such as Women Infants and Children (WIC), food banks, food pantries, and other non-governmental and state-sponsored health and food programs.⁷

An emphasis on nutrition education articulates with neoliberal discourses emphasizing self-improvement as a pathway to economic prosperity. Increased access, however, is a politic of resource distribution and inherently counter to the kinds of subjectivities that seem possible or reasonable under neoliberalism. The structure of food assistance programs reflects such an approach, leaving both food assistance workers and benefit recipients with limited tools to address the structural causes of food insecurity. Further, programmatic funding to address food insecurity has become increasingly dependent upon private funding, which often is more likely to emphasize health education as the solution to structural inequalities, as it is not the priority of private funders to challenge the underlying causes of food insecurity (Guthman, Morris and Allen 2006; Poppendieck 1999).

Case Study

This article stems from ethnographic research concerning farmworker food insecurity. I spent one and a half years doing fieldwork with both farmworkers and food assistance providers in the Northern Central Coast. Food assistance providers included individuals that work in the health department, food banks, and other emergency food or food assistance programs. In addition to individual interviews, I attended quarterly meetings of The Nutrition and Fitness Collaborative of the Central Coast (NFCCC), a group of state and non-governmental actors who work on issues related to health and fitness in the area.

The farmworkers discussed in this article are almost all members of a community garden, called the Oaxacan Children’s Garden, in a small Northern Central Coast city.⁸ The garden consists of one and a half arable acres located in the city’s downtown. Garden participants rent the space in exchange for a few workdays a year, maintaining foliage on the property to prevent fire hazards and thinning the landowner’s adjacent Christmas tree plot. During my research, the garden participants had completed one season and most were continuing participation in the garden for a second year. It has been funded by foundation money, although participants are looking into ways to sustain the garden more independently.

Twelve participating families each cultivate their own plot. Resources such as seeds, plant starts and plowing and irrigation equipment are purchased or rented as a group. The garden started as a satellite project of another group, the Oaxacan Cultural Project (OCP). The OCP was an immigrant community organization from the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca who identify with the indigenous groups Triqui and Mixteco. In 2009, a white community activist who was working with

OCP helped interested OCP members get access to land to start the garden. The activist initiated the project after hearing many people lament their loss of land and ability to produce their own food post migration.

Most participants arrived in California within the past 10 years and participating adults are mostly in their twenties and thirties. All participants previously farmed for sustenance (some also farmed for profit) on their ancestral lands in Mexico, growing nearly all their own food. They all now work as laborers in Californian agriculture, either in the fields or packinghouses. This is the first time they have had access to land to garden or farm since immigration.

Participants in the garden did not interact directly with the individual food assistance workers interviewed here, but some did take advantage of the programs described, especially food banks and WIC, in order to supplement food they bought in the store. They all noted that during the garden's harvest they were able to cut back on using these programs almost entirely.

This is a very unique project; most farmworkers do not have access to land to grow their own food as they live in marginal and crowded housing and lack access to land. Yet, the claims I make here concerning agricultural knowledge relate to farmworker and immigrant knowledge more generally. Although not all farmworkers or immigrants come to the USA from agrarian backgrounds, many arrive in the USA as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), where they were dispossessed from their own livelihoods as farmers by imported subsidized US corn (Fernández-Kelly and Massey 2007). Now working in US agribusiness and other low-wage industries, immigrants, many of whom have extensive knowledge of food and farming systems, are treated as knowledge deficient by food assistance programs. This case study highlights how misconceptions of immigrant knowledge foster the misappropriation of food assistance efforts, deterring from solving the problem of farmworker food insecurity at its root cause.

Immigrant Food and Racial Politics

Alternative food projects, such as gardens, often normalize and promote dominant food practices, creating hegemonic "white food spaces" (Slocum 2007). Actors in these spaces often assume a normative white culture as the way people relate to their food, without evoking critical thought about power relations in the food system (Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Alkon and McCullen 2011; Allen et al 2003; Allen 2004; Slocum 2011, 2007). In contrast, the immigrant gardens and farms that I describe below allow for immigrants to create their own spaces, combining a mix of techniques and practices learned in California with those brought from their farming experiences in Oaxaca.

In addition, the knowledges reproduced in the garden and farm spaces work to counter notions that people of color do not know what to eat or are simply making bad choices about their food.⁹ In contrast, when farmworkers I interviewed had access to a place and resources to grow the foods they preferred, their diets reflected those encouraged by mainstream food and nutrition "experts". There are many challenges to this approach, such as unstable funding and access to land, and ultimately the root of the problem still lies in farmworker poverty. Although gardens

are not a comprehensive or long-term solution to farmworker food insecurity, these growing spaces exemplify the ways that farmworkers eat when given the resources to do so.

The assumption that low-income people are lacking nutritional knowledge intersects with racial constructions that reinforce disparaging attitudes concerning people of color and their ways of being. Racial formations, which occur through a process of “historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized” (Omi and Winant 1994:55–56) are imposed and reinforced via power relations within the US food and agricultural system. This notion has been discussed in the context of agricultural regulations (Minkoff-Zern et al 2011), labor (Garcia 2002; Mitchell 1996; Walker 2004), inclusion in and access to markets (Alkon 2008a, 2008b; McClintock 2010, Slocum 2007), and inclusion (or the lack thereof) in alternative food movements (Alkon 2008a, 2008b; Allen 2004; Allen et al 2003; Guthman 2008a, 2008b; Harper 2010). Exploring the spaces and practices of food production and consumption serves to highlight race relations, as well as reflects on the ways in which food can create new forms of racial identity, politics, and discrimination (Slocum 2011).

Non-white immigrant food, and specifically Mexican food, has been discriminated against historically in the USA as “unsanitary” (Pilcher 2008). The American agrifood industry has embraced and promoted xenophobic fears, promoting “sanitary” and “pure” foods of European origin such as pasteurized cow’s milk and white bread (Bobrow-Strain 2008; DuPuis 2002), in contrast to foods consumed by immigrants of color or “contaminated” foods. In the context of this study, food assistance workers have interpreted immigrant foods as unhealthy and even unclean, reflecting the lack of understanding of immigrant foodways.

As America’s obsession with obesity develops (Biltekoff 2007; Guthman 2009), low-income people and people of color’s food habits are routinely criticized, without a thorough examination of the systemic causes of why such groups of people are disproportionately experiencing nutrition and weight-related health problems (Herndon 2005), or the ways in which alternative or “healthy” food spaces may reinforce racial inequalities (Alkon 2008a; Slocum 2007). Popular accounts of the American obesity epidemic often blame low-income people of color for their own bad choices, rather than developing a critical understanding of the structural injustices that lead to poor eating habits (Guthman 2009). This argument supports the ways in which food and nutrition education are promoted as the solution to health disparities, assuming it is a lack of knowledge rather than structural race and class-based inequalities which create such conditions. Ultimately such assumptions act to reproduce inequitable racial formations, by justifying the narrative of healthy food choice, and therefore placing blame on those that are unable to afford healthy food.

Food Assistance Programs and Educating Farmworkers to Eat “Good Food”

Despite what I argue are misguided foci of such programs, food assistance providers themselves generally understand that immigrants to the USA usually have had a

healthier diet in their countries of origin. They are aware that most of their clients and target population have only recently adapted to the American diet, consuming processed food and high levels of fat and calories that make them more prone to dietary-related disease.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the way that most food programs are structured does not leave workers with opportunities to acknowledge the nutritional knowledge low-income people already have, nor their particular dietary and income-related limitations. For example, in my research I found a substantial emphasis on cooking classes at farmers' markets, in schools, and at food banks. By focusing on what people need to be taught, via cooking and health education projects, these programs obscure uneven class relations. Such programs bypass the root of the problem: lack of ability to buy or grow foods people want to eat and, concomitantly, the ability to take part in the process of defining what constitutes a healthy meal.¹¹

The NFCCC has a "Food Access" subcommittee that meets quarterly. At a meeting I attended I found that rather than discussing *access*, many of the presentations at the meeting concentrated on nutrition education. The collaborative does promote programs such as increasing food stamp usage at farmer's markets and fruit, vegetable, and water availability in schools. Yet, much of the focus of the meeting was on how to get people to think differently about what they eat, through school education, foster parent education, and farmer's market education programs, rather than how to increase food affordability or accessibility.

Many food assistance workers I interviewed, attendees of the Food Access subcommittee as well as the general NFCCC meetings, exhibited ignorance of the nutritional needs and daily limitations of low-income and farmworker clients. At one NFCCC meeting in Watsonville, California it was mentioned that one of the food bank managers, who could not attend, needed suggestions for healthier options to give people that requested Ramen Noodles. This request sparked a heated debate among the members of the group. At first, many of the (mostly white) women in the room were appalled. They argued that Ramen Noodles are undoubtedly unhealthy, filled with sodium and full of fat. They were clearly disgusted that any food program could distribute such food to their clients. A woman representing the United Way interrupted the upheaval to bring attention to the fact that her homeless clients have different nutritional needs and abilities to prepare food than might be expected by assistance providers. She noted:

I sit on the United Way board for basic needs representing homeless people, and sometimes we have to be really careful about the nutritional level that we may want compared to homeless people who probably don't have a high sodium diet. They probably don't have a high fat diet. They need calories and they need food, so we need to be really careful not to be too much of a zealot on the nutritional aspect of it because their systems right now are different and they need different things than we who have meals all the time. I just want to point that out to be a little cautious to what we think nutrition is. Is it better to have a cup o noodle soup or have nothing?

She also pointed out that most clients don't have access to a kitchen or a way to heat food or even to open cans, something the other food assistance providers in the room had seemingly not thought of. One food bank manager echoed this disconnect in an interview: "We don't follow their day, we just give

emergency food.” Other food bank managers seemed more aware of the needs of their immigrant clients, recognizing that many of the foods they provide were not familiar, offering recipes for those foods, and attempting to provide culturally appropriate options. Yet no matter how aware the managers are, donation-based operations such as food banks and pantries are structurally limited in their ability to address the daily needs of low-income and farmworker communities, as they are dependent on mostly private funding streams, which limit their activities and approach to food insecurity.

In my experience in farmworker homes, Ramen Noodle and similar products are often readily consumed as inexpensive, fast, and hot meals. Although they are usually not homeless, many farmworkers live in very crowded living situations and some do not have regular access to a kitchen. High fat, calorie, and sodium products that are easy to prepare often seem like a good deal to those struggling to feed a family on less than a living wage.

Other regional programs, like the Latino Program of Champions for Change, also emphasize education. The California Department of Public Health sponsors the statewide Champions for Change program, whose goals include increasing fruit and vegetable consumption and encouraging exercise, especially in low-income communities. In the Northern Central Coast, the health department has a program expressly geared for outreach to Latino communities. According to the director, the Latino program is the only “ethnic” program in the regional network of Champions for Change. Although the program is not explicitly focused on farmworkers, a large proportion of the people they aim to address work in the fields.

The director discussed with me all the promotions they do to educate low-income consumers about eating more fruits and vegetables and exercising. The program encourages branding, in the form of small gifts with their logo, which according to her, will help people to remember the message of healthy eating and living. They bring promotional gifts and signage to retail stores, festivals, and markets where they expect low-income families to shop.

Although the program assumes a lack of consumer knowledge, when I asked her if she thought the people that her program targeted know what’s healthy to eat and she replied:

Most know what’s healthy to eat. When they immigrate they try to assimilate. Here it’s easier to access food that’s high in fat, like sausage and bacon. It’s harder to get and more expensive in Mexico. It’s like they forget what’s healthy. It depends, if both parents are working, there is not as much time to be preparing foods. With a stay-at-home mom, there is more time to prep, and more time to plan what’s going to be in a meal.

There are many programs, including the Latino Program, that educate children about eating local and healthy food. Many of these programs target schools where the majority of students’ parents are immigrants and work in the fields. Other food and nutrition education programs targeted towards children take place directly at farmer’s markets in low-income areas. Everyone’s Harvest, a non-profit organization, manages many of the regional farmers’ markets in conjunction with the Latino Program, and has a nutrition education program called Edible Education

for Healthy Youth, which they operate at Monterey County farmers' markets. They teach children how to shop for and prepare foods from the market. If farmworkers are the primary low-income populations in these regions and the assumed target populations are primarily Latino immigrants, one must ask, is teaching them how to shop at a market really addressing the needs of such consumers? In Mexico, the primary way most rural people purchase food is in open-air markets, similar in structure to the farmers' markets that Everyone's Harvest organizes. Shopping at such markets is not a new practice to recently arrived immigrants, yet they do not commonly attend the farmers' markets in California as a primary source of food. Income restrictions are often compounded with unwelcoming racial politics of farmers' markets (Alkon and McCullen 2011; Slocum 2007). Such efforts to educate low-income consumers at markets, which disregard the real causes of food insecurity and racial exclusions in food spaces such as farmers' markets, may actually compound racial exclusions in market places, as farmworkers and others who have vast nutritional and culinary knowledge do not feel their expertise is acknowledged.

New Places, New Foods

Research shows that it is only after living in the United States that Latino immigrants are prone to develop dietary-related health problems (Himmelgreen et al 2004; Kaplan et al 2004; Wolin et al 2008). All farmworkers I interviewed only started consuming meat, soda, and processed foods regularly after they arrived in California. They all expressed a desire for fresher, more natural and organic foods, which they associated with their growing and eating practices from Mexico. Yet, even those who work on organic farms cannot afford to buy organic produce or free range meats. Below, I explore the ways that immigration has affected farmworkers' eating habits and how these changes may lead to the perceptions of food assistance workers that immigrants lack healthy food knowledge.

In many instances immigrants, especially those from highland Oaxaca and other rural areas, have not been exposed to much high-fat and calorie-processed food before coming to the USA. Many of the farmworkers who participate in the garden noted the changes in their diet after they moved to the USA. Overall, they correlated their diet in Oaxaca as more "natural" and containing less chemicals or additives. As one farmworker explains, in Mexico they had little income in the form of money, but they did grow their own food and therefore consumed natural and organic foods:

In Mexico there is almost no work, but here we work a lot and we want to be thinner, but we get fat, sometimes from the food because it is changing a lot. For example, in Mexico one might not have work so they eat purely natural food. Here much of the food has a lot of fat. Many foods, like the chicken, has many chemicals, it has been in the store many days.

For many immigrants, their arrival in the USA is the first time they have been able to afford meat on a regular basis, due to the heavily subsidized meat available here.¹² People from rural parts of Mexico did not consume meat except on special occasions, and oftentimes only animals they had raised and slaughtered themselves.

Although many of them consume higher rates of meat now that they find it available, almost everyone I met complained of the quality and the fact that it was not natural or organic. Even though they ate meat very infrequently in Mexico, they were used to animals raised on their own farms, free range and fed a diversity of food scraps, rather than grains. Since they cannot afford high-quality meat here, they find the meat they buy in the store unsatisfactory, as one farmworker explains:

I don't buy much meat here. Sometimes people come here and they eat only meat. In Oaxaca we ate different wild herbs and such . . . Meats were natural as well. They weren't fed animal feed.

Another couple discussed their diet in Oaxaca with me. They stated that all they ate in Mexico was what they grew and the only meat they ate was chicken from their own yard:

Husband: Salt was the only thing we didn't have. Everything there, we planted.

Wife: In Mexico? There we ate only vegetables. Only vegetables; we didn't eat much meat or soda.

Husband: We also ate chicken there.

Wife: There we had chicken on the ranch. It was much better.

On the one hand, immigrants have a history of a healthy diet and extensive knowledge of preparing low-fat and vegetable-based foods. On the other hand, they are in a new place, which for many of them means foreign food that they have never been exposed to before. The fact that immigrants are being exposed to new “unhealthy” foods is a definite barrier in addressing the healthy needs of farmworkers, but this must be understood as part of the disenfranchisement that farmworkers are experiencing via immigration and incorporation in the labor market. Rather than focusing on education as the primary way to address farmworker food insecurity, the focus must be on the ways in which farmworkers are exploited as workers and consumers, while emphasizing their historical consumption and understanding of healthy diets. In the section below, I describe the ways that farmworkers themselves identify healthy foods.

Defining and Knowing “Healthy” Food in the Garden

The Desire for Fresh and Natural Food

The garden provides the participants a space where they can utilize their agricultural and nutritional knowledge to improve their diet, in comparison to the education-focused programs described above. In the garden, participants feel they are able to eat the food they deem healthy, which they define based on its freshness and lack of chemical additives. For most participants, the fact that the garden provided them with a way to eat such food was one of most important qualities of the produce they grew, as this otherwise privileged food was prohibitively expensive for them.

Eating food that was freshly harvested was the main way that participants connected their diets from the garden to their diets in Oaxaca. Although not all use the word organic, they often discussed food as more natural in Mexico, as

discussed above. When I asked them what they liked about eating from the garden, they explained that the food was grown without chemicals and was fresher than what they would buy in the stores. When I asked how the garden changed their diets and lives they responded with the fact that they could eat natural food, food more like what they ate in Oaxaca. For the garden participants, eating produce that is freshly harvested is what they are accustomed to and anything otherwise is simply less satisfying. One participant noted that the garden let him harvest the food when he wanted to eat it, so he could trust in the freshness of the food, unlike when he went to the store:

We have everything; cilantro and radishes. We go and cut the bunches when we need them and they are fresh. Sometimes the food in the store has been there for many days, and we bring it to the house and after three or four days the produce is yellow. I don't know how many days it has been in the store.

Another participant noted that the freshly harvested food tasted different to her; more like what she was accustomed to:

I like the garden that is there. [The produce we grow] there has different flavors than all the fruits [produce] that are in the store, because its natural and we don't put anything, like fertilizer, in it. It has nothing of this and it has another flavor. The cilantro and the papalo have another flavor. It's like Oaxaca and it has another flavor, different. I like it to plant—its purely natural.

Another woman made a similar comment:

The harvest and all of that, it is much better [in Oaxaca] because it does not have chemicals, it doesn't have this. [The garden] is more like there, like my land. I think it is the same, these vegetables as those from there [Oaxaca].

One family noted that it made organic produce accessible to them. The husband in this family is a field manager at an area organic farm, yet it was not until they started the garden that he was able to enjoy produce grown without added pesticides and non-organic fertilizer:

Wife: Yes, it changed our lives, because it gave us many fruits and more healthy food and the children all liked the fruits, cilantro, carrots, and other things.

Husband: Yes, it changed our lives. Before now, we ate purely lettuce with chemicals, but now we have a lot of food and only organic, we have more vitamins and it is healthier.

It is important to note that the participants' desire for fresh and natural or organic food is precisely the message of many current education and outreach programs regarding healthy eating, including those programs described above. The garden participants do not need to be taught about local and whole foods, as this is what they are accustomed to from their lives before migration. On the contrary, their standards for what counts as fresh and healthy may be higher than that of the average eater in the USA, as produce in the stores was sub-par according to many of the participants. As I describe below, the participants also include crop and diet diversity in their definition of healthy food, another important element of their agricultural and culinary practices.

Crop and Diet Diversity

In addition to freshness and lack of chemical additives, some families noted that they were able to eat particular foods that were part of their diet in Oaxaca, a diet that was rich in its diversity of vegetables, fruits, and herbs. Nutrition specialists and food activists alike often herald crop and diet diversity for its importance in healthful eating and environmental sustainability. Participants planted a large variety of crops that were part of their diet in Mexico. Crops that were the most significant to them were ones that they could not find easily available in California.

The most popular Mexican crop variety, which every garden participant grew, was papalo, or papaloquelite (also called Bolivian coriander, although it is native to Mexico), a herb that is commonly eaten raw to add flavor to tacos, salsas, and other dishes. Many garden participants would snack on it plain while harvesting in the garden. Mexican herbs and greens grown at the garden included two varieties of papalo, regular papalo and papalo morado, which is a smaller plant and less pungent in smell and flavor, as well as quintonil (a variety of amaranth greens), verdolagas (also known as purslane or Mexican parsley), herba mora, and other greens (called quelites, the Spanish word for uncultivated herbs). Such plants are often found in the wild in Mexico, and sometimes, friends or family brought or sent seeds across the border for planting in the garden.

Although garden participants did not speak in specific terms about nutritional content, they mentioned that these plants were good for their bodily health and the health of the garden, listing specific herbs and their uses, such as to alleviate stomach pains or keep away pests. All participants were excited to have these crops, which had been lacking in their diet since immigration. These greens provide garden participants with high amounts of important nutrients, such as vitamin A and C, magnesium, potassium, calcium, fiber, niacin, ascorbic acid, protein, and iron. At one home garden plot that I visited, a family was growing food next to their trailer located on the farm that they worked on. One man was growing epazote, a herb that is commonly used to increase digestion and reduce gas, and is therefore added to bean dishes. It is also used to ward off intestinal worms. These are all crops that are rarely found in stores or even Mexican markets in California, although participants had found some herbs, such as papalo, in other neighbors' home garden plots, and had therefore been able to access seeds for the community garden.

In addition to the specific herbs and greens discussed above, garden participants grew other crops that are more familiar to California, such as cilantro, tomatillo, tomato, corn, beans, summer squashes, peppers, carrots, green beans, onions, and garlic. Most of these seeds or plant starts were bought in local garden and farm supply stores, but a few varieties of beans, corn, and squash were also brought from Mexico. Other than the herbs, greens and a few corn varieties, most of the seeds brought from Mexico did not do well in the Californian climate, which is colder than the seeds' indigenous lowland areas in Mexico. A few of the gardeners told me that many of the bean and squash varieties would flower profusely and then not produce fruit. Of the ones that did produce well, the participants saved the seeds for the next year.

Ability to Make Oaxacan Foods and Dishes

Along with growing and consuming a diversity of foods, families said that they were able to make dishes from the crops that were not possible before the garden. One couple mentioned that with the corn from the garden they could make their corn flour (masa) for tortillas from scratch again. This was something they had been missing from Oaxaca:

Wife: I miss my garden because I see it here. (She points to the photos of the garden I gave her.) And I hope we do it again. I miss the milpa. I used the corn ears for making tortillas, like I did in Oaxaca. I used the milpa for masa.

Author: Are they better than the ones in the store?

Wife: Ah—yes, much better. You can't buy them here.

Husband: There we ate tortillas of only corn, and here they are made of wheat flour. We didn't like them, so we planted some ears of corn here. Yes, there [in Mexico] we ate purely good corncobs, tortillas made of corn. It was very good.

Author: So when you came here there weren't many tortillas made from corn, there wasn't the food from Mexico?

Wife: So we started to plant . . .

Another participant noted that in the USA the corn is sweeter, and not ideal for making masa. Since they had no corn to make masa here from scratch, they would buy masa in the store, which many families noted was not as good as the masa they made from their corn in Mexico. In contrast, with the garden, they were able to make their masa again, free of any additives, purely from corn:

Participant: They are softer, the tortillas from corn, because they are from corn. When you buy masa, it is not very good. [Tortillas] from corn are very good because it is purely corn, they don't have anything else. We don't put anything but corn. One hundred percent corn, and the tortilla is better.

Author: The corn is different than corn you can buy here?

Participant: Yes, because the corn here—there are some that are sweet, others that are not, and there [in Mexico], they are all normal. They aren't sweet; they are normal. Much of the corn is good to eat they are dry. There are other corn [varieties] that we grow for the ears. When they are dry they are not good, then you can use them to make tortillas.

A home gardener I visited noted that he likes his corn varieties from Oaxaca better than those he can find here, as it is less sweet than the corn from seeds he bought. He told me that the corn varieties he has from Mexico are also best for making *totopo*, a flat dry tortilla often made for Day of the Dead festivities. Oaxacans generally prefer non-sweet corn because it is higher in starch and therefore better to make specialties, such as fresh tortillas and totopos. It is generally hard to find in US stores and markets because corn sold for human consumption is bred for its sweetness in the USA (Martínez and Mendelson 1997).

Ultimately, what the garden shows us is that when given the resources and opportunity, immigrant farmworkers such as these were able and more than willing to eat what would be considered healthy food. Rather than making incorrect choices or not having the knowledge or preferences for healthy food, participants knew exactly what they wanted to eat and their food preferences for freshly harvested,

organic, and diverse produce were in line with what the food assistance providers discuss in terms of how to educate people to eat better foods. One woman explains:

It [the garden] gave everything we wanted. We had everything we needed. We didn't need to buy anything, we had our own fruits for ourselves, because in the store you need to have money and if you don't have money you can't buy anything. In the garden we planted everything and we ate everything.

At the garden participants were not only able to consume the foods they desired, they were able to save money for other purposes:

It helped us a lot to plant, and this year we didn't have to buy anything at the store . . . cilantro, radishes, corn, squash. It's all that we planted. They all came up. It was a year where we bought nothing at the store.

Every garden participant told a similar story. They saved money and were able to eat more fresh and organic produce. By spending less at the store for food, they were able to save money, which they could put towards other purposes, such as rent and health care. Ultimately the garden enabled the participants to start to access the food they desired and to re-connect to Oaxacan diets, culture and livelihoods.

Conclusion

The experiences of garden participants demonstrate that when money is not the limiting factor, immigrant farmworkers reclaim their agricultural and nutritional practices and knowledge and consume the foods they prefer. This strongly contrasts with the narratives of the food assistance workers and the common line of thinking among food activists, that low-income people of color do not know how to make good food choices. Rather, this case study shows that when given the space and opportunity to do so, most farmworkers are very competent to make “good” food choices. It is not a lack of education, but financial and spatial constraints that keep them from doing so.

Garden participants identified the garden as different from their workplaces. In contrast to laboring over menial and repetitive tasks in fields of monocropped agriculture, they utilized their own expertise and grew a diversity of foods for their own consumption. During our conversations they consistently expressed pride in the garden and nostalgia for their land in Oaxaca. For other farmworkers, though, gardening is not a possibility or a preferred way to access food. After working in the fields all day, many do not have the energy or desire to grow in their own garden plot. For these reasons, it is important to recognize the garden described here as a case study of immigrant knowledge, rather than a food security solution.

With the evidence that food insecurity is not in fact a matter of education or choice, we must shift the focus in alleviating food insecurity to the structural conditions that lead to this condition for farmworkers and other low-income people of color. Simultaneously though, while we approach solutions structurally, we must also see those who suffer from food insecurity as holders of knowledge that have been dispossessed from the ability to feed themselves in a healthy manner. Solutions must revolve around them as leaders and actors in the system, rather than simply those that are acted upon.

Furthermore, from this example we see the way that the intersections between food and racial politics work to underpin unjust racial formations based on inaccurate assumptions concerning race, class, and knowledge. In this case study, non-white immigrants' limited ability to afford food, which has been defined by systematic dispossession from the land and exploitation of their labor, is reinforced by a lack of recognition of their food knowledge and skills. By not recognizing the structural causes of food insecurity, food assistance providers work to reinforce racialized food inequalities.

When food security is framed in terms of education, it places the burden of choice onto those who are food insecure. In order to address the food insecurity of farmworkers and other low-income people, food assistance programs must be structured to recognize their clients' daily constraints to eating a healthy, balanced diet, and address the ways that healthy food is made available and/or restricted to low-wage earners. There is nothing inherently wrong with teaching children and their parents about their local agriculture and food systems. Rather, I highlight the fact that these programs, which are largely run by white women and funded by white farmers, are working to educate the children of farmworkers, many of whom are from agricultural backgrounds themselves. In these cases their parents work daily in the fields and rather than lacking an education on what is available in their region, the issue is affordability, as their parents' wages cannot purchase the diversity of produce they are learning about. More important than teaching students and low-income people in this region what is growing around them, energy and resources spent in these programs could be more wisely refocused to confront low farmworker wages and racialized exploitation.

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Endnotes

¹ Food access is discussed as both a matter of cost and geographic proximity. In this article I refer to access in terms of affordability.

² I reference good or healthy food in quotes to point out their multiple meanings to different people, as the definition of what is good or healthy to eat is a subjective one.

³ All research was conducted solely by the author from January 2010- May 2011. All interviews with farmworkers and garden participants were conducted in Spanish and translated by the author.

⁴ I identify the Northern Central Coast as inclusive of Monterey, Santa Cruz, and San Benito counties.

⁵ This sample of workers is not representative of all farmworkers or recent immigrants. This study sample mostly migrated to California directly from rural Oaxaca, where they had little access to processed food and were dependent on subsistence farming. Their interest in and knowledge of agriculture and nutrition may therefore be more significant than farmworkers emigrating from other parts of Mexico and Latin America.

⁶ See Boyer et al (2006), Brown and Getz (2011) and Quandt et al (2004) for statistics on farmworker food insecurity. I also conducted a basic food security survey following USDA guidelines (Carlson, Andrews and Bickel 1999) with the participants in the garden before the first season, and found all participants to be “food insecure with hunger”.

⁷ Most farmworkers are undocumented and are therefore not eligible for all forms of public food assistance, although they are eligible for WIC and outreach programs which do not require registration, such as those discussed below. Private programs to address food insecurity have grown to replace public programs, as they have lost support in the advent of the neoliberal state (Poppendieck 1999). Yet, I found that the divide between public and private programs was not entirely clear, as public agencies were collaborating with private interests and farmworkers were utilizing both.

⁸ The name of the city will remain anonymous to protect the identity of garden participants, although the garden’s name is real.

⁹ Critical food studies scholars such as Harper (2010) and Guthman (2008b) argue that there are many health food and alternative food system activists that assume people of color eat “unhealthy” diets due to a lack of knowledge about healthy food.

¹⁰ Many studies show that the length of time an immigrant stays in the US positively correlates with a rise in obesity rates, especially in Latino populations. All the studies associate this rise in obesity with the consumption of a more “American” diet (Barcenas et al. 2007; Himmelgreen et al 2004; Kaplan et al 2004; Wolin et al 2008) Yet, Guthman (2011), points out that the rise in obesity among immigrants may also be related to toxins in the new industries immigrants work in.

¹¹ For certain populations, such as those that are US-born and raised during the shift away from whole foods and to prepackaged and processed food in the 80’s, this type of education may be the most important intervention to addressing food related illnesses.

¹² The subsidies I am referring to are for the grain that animals are fed on.

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