



HOMECOMING

Learning the Personalities of Plants

THE WISDOM, COMFORT, AND HEALTH THAT COME FROM DEEPLY KNOWING YOUR RELATIVES

WHERE MY FAMILY IS FROM in northern New Mexico, the intermarriage between the Pueblo tribes with the Spanish and Mexican people resulted in a tri-culture unique to the central Rio Grande Valley. As I grew up I learned that my people's songs, dances, and foods were often celebrated and kept alive by disguising them and marrying them into Catholic and Spanish traditions. Over the years I have been working to reconnect with the original languages and dances of my Indigenous ancestors, but mostly, because I am a chef, I work to tell those stories through my recipes.

Many years ago, an elder explained to me something that I knew innately: that plants *are* our relatives. Each one has a family, a personality, and a purpose—just like us. I loved the way the elders and teachers would talk about plants.

"Don't give that plant too much water, or he'll get mad."

"Pick this herb in the morning, when she's fresh and awake."

These relationships made me curious, so I decided to learn more about the personalities of the plants that I grew up with. I prayed to these plant relatives, asking them for guidance as I started on my ancestral food journey. Little did I know that their stories had been with me all along.

BLUE CORN

She is Mother—beautiful, strong, and comforting. She has watched me grow over the course of my entire life, first introducing herself through my mother's milk. Blue Corn atole, a porridgelike mush, has been prepared for me by my mother, my grandmother, and my great-grandmother. When you knead Blue Corn into dough to make tortillas, her sweet scent lingers on your hands like a mother's perfume after a long, long hug. Blue Corn is the ultimate nurturer; she is Tonantzin, the mother goddess wrapped in a rebozo (shawl) husk.



Eyes

Beata Kruszynski

GREEN CHILE

He's my pesky brother—always there causing heat and trouble. He made my grandfather curse and sweat, causing him to wipe his brow with his hankie. When roasted outside, his smoke goes straight up to the skies, irritating the clouds and making them cry. That is why we get so much rain in August. For all of his trouble, I must really love him, because I allow him to bother me each and every day. His fiery temper somehow relieves my headaches, and his scent reminds me that I am home.

NOPALES

She is my old Auntie—protective and resourceful. Collecting the rains for months on end, she saves them up to adorn her spiny green pads with delicious jewels called prickly pears. And just like an old Auntie, with a half-eaten sandwich at the bottom of her purse, she surprises you with something to eat. Growing up, my grandmother would pickle Nopales, but I prefer to eat her fresh, thinly sliced in a salad. When going out to harvest Nopales, you have to be very careful and very patient, because just like old Aunties, if you try to rush them, they will make you wait.

BEANS

They are truly your best friends. You can talk to them every single day because they're always around. They are very dependable and they will always be there for you. Like Blue Corn, they too have seen you grow, first watching you sort them out with your little fingers. Cooked with a few sprigs of the herb epazote, beans never get boring, allowing me to enjoy their company any time of day. When they get cold, I wrap them up in a warm tortilla and introduce them to my pesky brother. Once in middle school, I got called a "beaner." I knew it was meant as an insult, but quite frankly, I didn't understand. Yes, I was going home to another pot of beans, but she was probably going home to another frozen lasagna.

VERDOLAGAS

A long-lost relative, I remember picking her from my father's land near the Pecos River. She seemed happy and grew abundantly with the other wild greens. We ate her tiny little leaves simply sautéed with Chile, onions, and garlic. She was so valued that the women of Isleta Pueblo would dry her fleshy leaves slowly in clay ovens, to be eaten in the winter months. Then one day, she got labeled a weed—common purslane—which almost erased her from our plates and even from the landscape. Nearly suffocated, she kept surfacing through the concrete, looking for someone to remember her. She refused to believe that her story had ended. So now, like a long-lost relative, she is being celebrated and remembered once again as one of the most nutritious greens. Sometimes, when I'm walking down the street, I will see her peeking through the cracks in the sidewalk. I kneel down to pick her up gently, and I thank her, because she is me.

—FELICIA COCOTZIN RUIZ

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