



Photo: Marcelo Aizaga

The Emergent Kitchen: 'food for life' in Ecuador in the face of COVID-19

The contradictions between the highly rational, commodified, competitive 'masculinity' of industrial food and the feminist preoccupation with life have become increasingly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ecuador. Meanwhile, a growing number of families are finding inspiration in the 'Emergent Kitchen' programme, created by a collection of social movements that utilises the kitchen as a space of encounter and re-constitution of the possibility of 'food for life'.

By Eliana Estrella, Marcelo Aizaga and Stephen Sherwood



Over time, we and others involved in the lively social movements in Ecuador have come to understand food not just as a bundle of nutrients or a commodity, but as a necessary and important space for creating and maintaining relations. In other words, food generates *affect*. Following 75 years of deepening industrialisation in food and its well documented harmful consequences, we and our partners in the lively *Colectivo Agroecológico*, a network of actors involved in healthy, sustainable, socially equitable farming and eating (what we call 'food for life'), seek a radical feminisation of food. What does that mean?

The feminisation of food As the feminist-biologist scholar Donna Haraway explains, history shows the danger of conforming to reductionist identity politics (i.e., reducing the world of human experience to power struggles over sex, race or social class), which underlies much of the discourse of feminism without appreciating the importance of difference, as defined by one's preferences, creativity and flair. For example, fellow agroecology activists commonly characterise problems with modernisation in food as the product of a distant 'system', and part of a historical battle between a marginalised campesino class and elite urban-based consumers. This depiction holds some truth, but its detachment can create a sense of frustration and hopelessness in the quest for solutions.

Inspired by Haraway, we find that more immediate, concrete change can come from where we have greater access and influence: within the home, neighbourhood and community. We continually ask those eager for change to start with a reflection over their own activity as one who eats, and hence is involved in the constitution and structuring of the present state of things – for good or for bad.

According to Haraway, a call from 'us' on behalf of a certain identity may end up deepening the same divisive, violent history that activists aspire to end. Instead, Haraway summons more unifying, inter-subjective activity: *affinity*, understood as the state of one's relationships with other people as well as between people and the environment, in this case, the degree of socio-biological well-being generated in and through one's agri-food practice. It's not that identity politics is wrong, she explains, it's that in perpetuating a division between us and them, people of difference can come to neglect their commonality and interdependence with others. In other words: by drawing lines around groups of people, we lose access to potential allies and their experience, insights and resources.

Grassroots food movements in Ecuador, of which we are a part, have long embraced the affinity of food. In the context of COVID-19, we have encountered new conflict with the food industry and its state and corporate allies, but also in our own families, neighbourhoods and communities. We summarise a few elements of the food controversy arising from the pandemic in Ecuador. We then introduce 'The Emergent Kitchen' – a response from thousands of families from different walks of life, but sharing a common interest in healthier, more socially equitable and sustainable ways of living and being in and through food.

The official response to COVID-19 With the recognition of the arrival of the coronavirus and above all, the outbreak of an epidemic in Guayaquil, Ecuador entered a regime of movement restriction and personal protection measures, including: social distancing, mandatory use of masks, and an unprecedented imposed quarantine. From 13th March, people were only permitted to circulate in public once a week for food or medical attention. A 14:00h - 05:00h curfew was imposed on weekdays, and all day on the weekend.

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These measures did not take into account the importance of family-level food, health care, and immune system strengthening, which health experts define as central to disease resistance. The National Emergency Operations Committee initially limited food provision to private companies. Even though they provide almost 70% of Ecuador's fresh food, family farmers lacked the required documents to sell their products in public. Despite the risk of contagion in closed spaces, the government forced the closure of traditional outdoor markets as well as all agroecological markets and fairs.

The existing capacity of families and neighbourhoods to provide for their own nutrition, food and bodies was overlooked. Instead, policies continually emphasised 'safe', highly processed supermarket foodstuffs, despite growing concern over an even worse pandemic tied to industrial food: overweight/obesity and its association with the lethality of COVID-19. In summary, the state's public response to the lockdown-induced food crisis was: trust us, and let us provide what you need.

Faced with a government that neglected direct producer-consumer relations, families and neighbourhoods needed to find their own solutions. But this turned out not to be easy. We share two examples of the challenges of gaining access to fresh, healthy food, even in the rural areas outside of the city, through the stories of Erlinda and Paul.

Peri-urban vulnerability: Erlinda and Paul

While people may expect food dependency in the city, we were surprised to learn that it had become an issue in surrounding villages. Erlinda has her farm near Quito, Ecuador's capital. Although she lives in a community surrounded by countryside, nowadays most of her neighbours have left the hoe and machete behind to work in the flower export industry, construction, as a housemaid, or in clothing maquilas.

Erlinda explains that this situation has created great dependency among her neighbours: "What I like most about my farm is the diversity of Andean roots, vegetables, tubers and grains that I grow as well as my seed bank. When we were forced to undergo quarantine, the neighbours who were not involved in planting began to panic and come [to me] for food..."

Meanwhile, Paul is an elderly Frenchman with over thirty years in the Andes. Preferring the fresh air of the *campo*, he chose to live in a peri-urban community of the *Kitukara* – an indigenous group. Being over 55 years of age, the government's policy did not permit him to leave home. At first, he did not worry.

Nevertheless, after the first week, Paul quickly realised that the local store shelves no longer had fresh food. "There were no vegetables, no fruit, no eggs. There were only noodles, cans and junk food. At that moment, I realised that despite living in an indigenous

community, people no longer produced anything [of food]. We were just as vulnerable as the people [in the city]."

In both of these cases, neighbours had chosen rural residence but earned their living in the city. People had stopped cultivating potatoes and maize, raising guinea pigs and chickens, and growing and cooking with their own herbs and vegetables. In the process, such communities lost touch with their seeds, animals, and customs. They had their life in the *campo* in every way, except physically. In terms of food security, they had become dependent on the market and the whims of others. Given the burgeoning food crisis, something was needed to help people begin to re-construct their food sovereignty.

The Emergent Kitchen: waking up 'the people who eat'

"We are once again in an age where the search for fresh food has become our primary concern." -- Chef Esteban Tapia, during a session of The Emergent Kitchen

In response to food challenges facing urban and rural dwellers, the Agroecology Colectivo (*Colectivo*) and the Ecuadorian Movement for Social and Economic Solidarity (MESSE), joined forces to solve problems with production, distribution and procurement. In particular, they made use of a series of well-established communication platforms developed over the last ten years through their joint campaign for 'response-able' consumption: *QueRicoEs!*.

The Colectivo and MESSE consider the production and exchange of food as fundamental to the identity, health, environment and social well-being of people. Through 'eating well' in every way, we argue,



Social distancing at the Carcelen market in the North of Quito. Photo: Diana Cabascango

The objective of feminist food is to nurture the synergies found among us.

food growers and eaters can collectively care for health, culture and the environment; they can advance their food sovereignty. As such, the goal of QueRicoEs! is not just ethical responsible food practice, but also establishing the relationships and socio-biological feedback necessary for food that is responsible: that continually negotiates practice and context for health, sustainability and social equity.

In the context of COVID-19, this led to a series of effective civil society responses, including practical hygiene protocols, information on accessing personal protective equipment and remote diagnostic services, and laboratories offering tests. Partners in the different food movements shared seeds, irrigation equipment and vehicles that were permitted to circulate on certain days. They set up communication channels for families in search of specific ways to access and prepare fresh, healthy food. Free internet-based consultations were organised on urban gardening, nutrition for disease resistance and healthy cooking, fermentation and food storage.

As part of these efforts, we began to experiment with a series of live public debates on radio and social media, giving birth to the Emergent Kitchen. The weekly programme consists of open-ended conversations among people who are looking for good, healthy food, such as farmers, housewives, professional cooks, and store owners. As an illustration, we'd like to share a conversation that took place between Michelle O. Fried, a nutritionist and author of popular cookbooks, and Ibeth, a housewife from Quito:

Ibeth: *"Hello, good afternoon. Could you tell me the name of this thing?"*

Showing an image, Ibeth explained that she was baffled by a mysterious, Sputnik-looking object that was sitting on her kitchen counter.

Michelle: *"Good to try something new and delicious. It is kohlrabi. It is a compact, almost leafless cabbage. Although its small upper leaves are also very rich. Where did you get it?"*

Ibeth: *"I ordered an organic basket and this product came to me. But, I don't know how to prepare it."*

Michelle: *"An unusual way to prepare it, but one that I love, is to grate the raw tube and add vinaigrette with a little toasted sesame oil ..."*

During the programme, people share their experience with dishes made from other unusual, under-utilised, tasty vegetables, including watercress, achocha, chayote, arugula and white carrot. Michelle explains that such little-known, highly nutritious products from the Andes as well as other parts of the world have increasingly been displaced by processed food-stuffs, which in turn undermines the health of families and cultures. In Michelle's words, a response starts in the kitchen, as *"The kitchen is where the family is cared for and protected from illness."*

Despite the worries and urgencies that came with the pandemic and the confinement of quarantine, participants in the Emergent Kitchen programme came to realise that this is a time for overcoming fears by exposing one's palate to new flavours and tastes and by utilising the food experience as a means of taking charge of their situation.

The affinity of food for life As one member of the public put it during The Emergent Kitchen, *"Our aim after the pandemic is not to return to normal!"* We seek more.

Consistent with Andean cosmovision, radical feminism understands affinity and affect holistically, contributing to the well-being of all people, regardless of gender, race or income. Applied to agriculture and food, this perspective seeks to address the socio-biological relations enabled through human-human and human-environmental interactions.

Andean cosmology and feminism are both founded on the idea that one's reality is built on endless collective histories - with the soil, water, plants, the sun and the sky, with taste and flavour. Consequently, the objective of feminist food is not to make individual differences disappear - between the sexes, urban and rural or among races - but rather to nurture and embrace the synergies found among us all, in this case as enabled by means of the relational practice of *food for life*.

With the arrival of COVID-19, we find great tragedy and sadness in the illness and deaths in our families and neighbourhoods, but we also find the possibility of a more *feminist* meal, constituted through affection and care for our co-existence. In providing a platform for people to share an affinity for healthy, sustainable, and culturally and socially empowering cooking and eating, the Emergent Kitchen contributes to the embodiment of a practice that nurtures life in and through food, in all of its wonderful expressions, differences and integration.

Eliana Estrella, Marcelo Aizaga and Stephen Sherwood are active in the QueRicoEs! Campaign of MESSE and the Agroecology Collective in Ecuador. In addition to finding information at www.quericoes.org, you can listen to a programme of the Emergent Kitchen or *Cocina Emergente* (in Spanish) on Facebook. Contact: ssherwood@ekorural.org