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# Food Sovereignty and Cultural Preservation in Rural Mexico: A Case Study of Mujeres del Fuego

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*Note:* Authors are listed alphabetically with the faculty mentors listed last.
*Cover photo:* A distinctive symbol of a Mujeres del Fuego kitchen.

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Reach researchers with three traditional cooks after visiting their kitchen near Ahualulco de Mercado (photo by Iza Siller)

**Figure 1.** Volcano of Fire of Colima (photo by Miguel tadeo Rodriguez Mendoza, iStock)

# Executive Summary


Despite being one of Mexico's smallest states, Colima possesses a remarkable ecological diversity, where numerous climates and landscapes converge within a few kilometres. This geographical variety is reflected in its cuisine. However, Colima's culinary heritage is increasingly impacted by a rapidly changing food landscape, shaped by industrialization, globalization, and shifting labour patterns. These systemic pressures threaten local food systems, sparking concerns about the survival of ancestral knowledge, and the protection of food sovereignty.

Within this shifting context, traditional cooks have emerged as a powerful force of resistance. While technological and economic shifts continue to disrupt food consumption patterns, the food these women prepare remains an active, physical expression of their community's relationship with the land. Drawing on ancestral knowledge of biodiversity, seasonality, and food preparation, they have transformed what was once uncompensated domestic labour into recognized livelihoods and cultural work.

Born in 2016, *Mujeres del Fuego* is a collective of traditional women cooks who have transformed the intimate act of cooking into a visible, collective endeavour. The group brings together food producers, cooks, and teachers who pursue independent projects while engaging in collective efforts to scale their social impact.

Leading and thriving together, they have reclaimed the kitchen — historically a restrictive, gendered space — transforming it into a place of solidarity. By involving the wider community, especially younger generations, they are keeping Colima's biodiversity and cultural identity alive despite the pressures of modernity.

The collective work of Mujeres del Fuego invites other communities to look within their own territories for inspiration and adopt a model built on three core pillars: fair pay, cultural guardianship, and autonomy. Through an exploration of this collective's experience, we find that food choices can directly support traditional cuisine, empowering cooks through fair labour and fostering food sovereignty while preserving biodiversity and cultural knowledge for future generations.

# Context: Food As Memory, Heritage, and Connection to the Land

*Colima* is named after the Náhuatl word *Coliman*, derived from *colli* (grandfather or volcano) and *maitl* (hand or dominion), commonly interpreted as "the place where the God of Fire reigns."[1] Bordering the state of Jalisco and guarded by the Volcán de Fuego and the Nevado de Colima, this small state is home to approximately 731,391 residents, 50.7 per cent of whom are women.[2]

Historically an agricultural powerhouse growing sugar cane, lime, coconut, and mango, Colima has a diverse culinary tradition rooted in local ingredients and ancient culinary techniques, such as grinding maize and hand pressing tortillas.[3] Food there is not mere sustenance — it embodies collective memory, heritage, and connection to the land.

This bond between food and identity was shaped by centuries of commercial and cultural exchange, tracing back to the state's Náhuatl roots and to Spanish cuisine's role in the Manila Galleon trade route. The route transformed Colima into a main gateway for Asian spices, ingredients, and culinary techniques.[4] In recognition of this historical and cultural value, the state declared its traditional cuisine as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Colima in 2017.[5]

The traditions that shape Colima's culinary identity co-exist with a rapidly changing food landscape. Across Mexico, globalization is industrializing food production and altering how food is grown, prepared, and shared. The pressures facing local food systems raise broader questions about food sovereignty, women's labour, and the future of traditional cultural and culinary knowledge in Colima.

## Pressures of Modern Food Systems

Modern agri-food systems are built around profit, favouring monocultures — the cultivation of a single crop over an extensive area of land — as well as the use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and mechanized technologies. Over time, this depletes the soil and narrows crop diversity. Monoculture practices also run counter to how traditional cultures have long understood food production. Take the *milpa*, a pre-Hispanic agricultural system still practised in parts of Mexico, where corn, beans, chili, and tomatoes are among the crops that can be grown together, not by accident, but because each plant supports the others. Corn and beans, for instance, balance nitrogen in the soil, while some plants physically prop others up as they grow. More than a planting technique, the *milpas* represent ancestral knowledge that the dominant industrial model has pushed aside.

The agri-food industry pressures small-scale farmers, whose crops often reflect a region's biodiversity, but who cannot compete with industrial operations that drive prices down. This dynamic is evident in Mexico's growing reliance on imported foods since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) opened Mexico's markets to large volumes of US agricultural imports sold at very low prices. Before NAFTA, Mexico imported only 7 per cent of corn and 18 per cent of its wheat, both central to the national diet. These numbers rose to 38 and 66 per cent respectively by 2023.[6] Mexico's national food self-sufficiency rate dropped from roughly 75 per cent in

1 "¿De dónde proviene el nombre de Colima?" *El Heraldo de México*, 16 February 2021.

2 "Censo de Población y Vivienda 2020," Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), 25 January 2021.

3 "Censo Agropecuario 2022. Resultados Definitivos. Colima," Resultados Definitivos Del Censo, Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), 21 November 2023.

4 Carlos Federico Diego Vila, "Colima celebra su herencia filipina con gastronomía," *Food & Wine en Español*, 9 May 2023.

5 "Decreto 432," H. Congreso del Estado de Colima, LVIII Legislatura.

6 Timothy Wise, "Swimming Against the Tide: Mexico's Quest for Food Sovereignty in the Face of US Agricultural Dumping," Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), May 2023.

2018 to 69.5 per cent in 2022.[7] Traditional cooks feel the consequences directly. One of them told us: "We have lost the tradition of people planting because they no longer see the fruit of their labour."

The dominant agri-food system is a product of colonial processes that disrupted local food systems and privileged foreign foods, production methods, and cultural practices over local ones. While these hierarchies originated during Spanish colonial rule, they persist through contemporary trade agreements and global food markets. Consequently, the modern agri-food system shapes how and what people eat, distancing them from their local food environments and normalizing imported products — a pattern that researchers have called the "colonization of taste." For example, referring to the growing influx of fast-food chains and their popularity in Mexico, one researcher lamented how "suddenly younger generations think their gastronomic culture is fast food and soft drinks."

> "The modern agri-food system shapes how and what people eat, **distancing them from their local food environments** and normalizing imported products — a pattern that researchers have called the "colonization of taste."

This shift in consumption patterns has disproportionately affected Mexico's rural populations, particularly women. In 2018, more than 70 per cent of women living in rural areas experienced food insecurity, with low dietary diversity closely linked to poorer nutritional outcomes.[8] As ultra-processed foods increasingly replace locally grown foods,[9] health consequences have been significant; obesity now affects three-quarters of adults and 40 per cent of children and adolescents, contributing to alarming rates of diabetes and hypertension among Mexicans.[10]

## Generational Differences

Younger generations are turning away from traditional cooking practices, drawn instead to ultra-processed foods, cuisines, and dishes outside Mexican culinary tradition. As they migrate to big cities in search of economic opportunities, the family gatherings that sustained traditions are fading. For example, the ritual of grandmothers preparing tamales for special celebrations is growing rare. As one traditional cook puts it: "People are no longer interested — there is more entertainment and distractions. Youth especially are no longer as interested in gathering with their family and would rather do other things available to them."

However, new generations should not be blamed for choosing a different path than their parents. The lives of traditional cooks and *campesinos* are laborious and often do not generate enough income, so many have abandoned the tradition. Similarly, traditional cooking is losing ground to store-bought foods because people no longer have time to prepare often-elaborate traditional dishes while managing full-time work. Still, exceptions exist. In some families, culinary practices are passed down through generations and are deeply rooted in their way of life. As one traditional cook explains: "When my grandchildren come and we are going to cook, each one has their little *mandilito* [apron] and little *torteadorita* [tortilla press]. I tell them, 'What you

7 "Informe de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social en México 2012," Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (CONEVAL), 2012.

8 Anaid Arango-Angarita, Alejandra González-Moreno, Fabiola Tercero-Gómez, Verónica Mundo Rosas, Caroline Deschak, and Teresa Shamah-Levy, "Food Insecurity Is Associated with Low Dietary Diversity in Rural Women in Mexico: Results from the Mexican National Health and Nutrition Survey, ENSANUT 2018," *Ecology of Food and Nutrition* 62, no. 5–6 (2023): 286–307.

9 Juan A. Rivera, Mónica Arantxa Colchero, Carolina Pérez-Ferrer, and Simón Barquera, "Perspective: Mexico's Experience in Building a Toolkit for Obesity and Noncommunicable Diseases Prevention," *Advances in Nutrition* 15, no. 3 (2024): 100180.

10 Elisa Pineda, Eric J. Brunner, Clare H. Llewellyn, and Jennifer S. Mindell, "The Retail Food Environment and Its Association with Body Mass Index in Mexico," *International Journal of Obesity* 45 (2021): 1215–28.

make is what you are going to eat for breakfast'." In other cases, it is the younger generation that drives the recovery of the *saberes* (ancestral wisdom) by developing a renewed interest in planting, rescuing seeds, or traditional culinary techniques, bringing their families along with them.

> "For many young girls, cooking has become associated with the oppression and *machismo* (sexism) that **confined previous generations to the household.** Consequently, as women are no longer exclusively dedicated to domestic chores, and men have largely failed to take up this space, ancestral recipes and practices are increasingly at risk of disappearing.

### Gender Roles and the Transmission of Culinary Knowledge

At the heart of these *saberes* are women, who have historically carried the burden of domestic labour under patriarchal and *machista* (sexist) social norms, representing most traditional cooks. Although their dedication ensured the survival of this culinary knowledge, much of what is celebrated as cultural heritage was born out of confinement. Women often dedicated themselves fully to developing and preserving recipes because opportunities to study, work, and participate in public life were denied to them. Within this gendered division of labour, culinary knowledge was transmitted from and to the women in the family: grandmothers, mothers, and daughters.

As gender roles shift, being in the kitchen is no longer a life sentence as women are dedicating themselves to other endeavours. However, this liberation carries an unintended cost: as women take on roles beyond domestic labour, the time and social structures that once enabled the transmission of culinary knowledge are being eroded. For many young girls, cooking has become associated with the oppression and *machismo* (sexism) that confined previous generations to the household. Consequently, as women are no longer exclusively dedicated to domestic chores, and men have largely failed to take up this space, ancestral recipes and practices are increasingly at risk of disappearing.

## A Force of Resistance: Traditional Cooks

We found that traditional cooks exercise resistance in four ways: by rooting their cuisine in the land and the biodiversity that industrial agriculture displaces, by asserting food primarily as nourishment rather than a commodity, by safeguarding and transmitting embodied knowledge across generations to resist its loss, and by turning often-undervalued domestic labour into a recognized livelihood and act of cultural preservation.

### Traditional Cooking Rooted in the Land

In our fieldwork, we found that one of the ways traditional cooks emerge as a force of resistance is through the food they make and the traditional cuisine they preserve and share. Despite the economic and technological transformations that have reshaped food production and consumption,

traditional cooking remains a concrete expression of communities' relationship with the land.

Historically, women have carried food work beyond the kitchen, tending plants and animals and transmitting "everything from knowledge of plant names and how to raise animals for food," including respect for "the labour of the farmer and the bounty of nature."[11] Many of the cooks we interviewed held deep ties to agriculture; they worked the land themselves or had family members who did, and many kept their own rancho or small rural plots where they grew select crops and raised livestock.

Cooks held a deep understanding of and appreciation for ingredients' origin and for local biodiversity. One cook described traditional food as "the cuisine of one's surroundings — of one's trees, rivers, and homestead." Another, whom we visited at her rural home, recalled learning to cook by gathering *quelites*,[12] mushrooms, *verdolaga*,[13] and *temachaca*[14] from the land surrounding her home and adding them to her *cazuelas*[15] and *moles*.[16] In fact, one interviewee described traditional cuisine as a form of "environmental knowledge," explaining that people learn from an ecosystem "which plants are safe to eat, which animals are around them."

The role of a traditional cook extends beyond preparing a dish, positioning women as "pillars of biocultural memory" who enable the "revival of agroecological practices associated with the preparation of traditional dishes."[17] Among the cooks we interviewed, these practices included seed preservation and a commitment to the seasonality of ingredients. As one cook puts it, "traditional food is seasonal food," incorporating what the land offers in a given period. Another cook had developed a culinary experience centred on the seasonality of foods, guiding guests on a hike to learn about native trees and roots, and leading a workshop where they prepare and eat a dish incorporating seasonal ingredients.

"As one interviewee explained, "The act of cooking one recipe or another, and of showing that these products have a particular flavour, promotes interest in certain **flavours that are at risk of extinction** or of falling into disuse."

Seed preservation not only integrates existing biodiversity into dishes, but it also actively defends biodiversity by protecting the crop varieties that distinct flavours and cultural heritage depend on. As one interviewee explained, "The act of cooking one recipe or another, and of showing that these products have a particular flavour, promotes interest in certain flavours that are at risk of extinction or of falling into disuse." Traditional cooks therefore not only reflect their ecosystem in their dishes but also protect it through practices that precede cooking itself. As one cook from Colima told us, "From the volcano to the beach, there are many microclimates that are largely in our defence ... As long as we keep

11 Maria Elisa Christie, "Kitchenspace, Fiestas, and Cultural Reproduction in Mexican House-Lot Gardens," *Geographical Review* 94, no. 3 (2004): 368–90.

12 A range of edible wild or semi-cultivated greens used in traditional Mexican cooking.

13 Known as purslane in English, it is an edible succulent plant. Although it grows in the wild, it is also cultivated as a vegetable and is used in Mexican cuisine both cooked and in raw form.

14 The common name in north-central Mexico (primarily in Jalisco and Zacatecas) for the *Acacia coulteri* tree. The tree's shoots and buds are foraged in the spring and used as an edible green often added to broths.

15 Primarily refers to a traditional round, wide, and shallow pot made of clay used for cooking and serving stews.

16 *Mole* is one of Mexico's most iconic dishes. The word *mole* derives from the Nahuatl term *molli*, meaning "sauce." Many variations of *moles* exist, typically combining chiles, spices, seeds, or nuts, and sometimes chocolate.

17 Hortencia Guarneros Manoatl and Rocío Torres García, "El rescate de la cocina tradicional mexicana como un puente hacia la agroecología y la protección del bien común," *Contraste* 12, no. 23 (2024): 187–202.

**Figure 2.** The agave monoculture in Jalisco, where rising global demand for agave spirits has driven the expansion of plantations across the region

asking for those ingredients and incorporating them into our dishes, I don’t think they will die.”

This strong connection to the native ecosystem is also what makes traditional cuisine so deeply place based. Mujeres del Fuego cooks are known for specializing in a specific dish or ingredient, at times reflecting the different geographies of Colima state, whether coastal, volcanic, mountainous, or forested, depending on where they are based. A cook from coastal Colima shared that she was most recognized for her *salpicón* made with local fish, whereas one of the collective’s members in El Remate, the interior of Colima bordering Jalisco, shared that she specialized in making dairy products and raised livestock herself. As one interviewee noted, “after each hill there is a different culture ... All cultures have those treasures that exist only in those places,” illustrating how what the land yields shapes what is cooked.

Traditional cuisine depends on and protects biodiversity, producing dishes with ingredients that are native to the land and in season, while modern agri-food systems threaten biodiversity through monoculture and increasingly orient production toward external markets, severing communities’ connection to the foods native to their ecosystems. Driving through Jalisco, we observed the agave monoculture first-hand, where native ecosystems and traditional agriculture have been replaced by agave plantations, as increases in global demand for agave spirits incentivize landowners to cultivate it.[18] Moreover, because agribusiness centres on high-value crops demanded by international markets, crop varieties that fall outside this profit logic are left unplanted or displaced by more financially lucrative alternatives. Even as traditional crops like maize continue to be planted across Mexico, their native seed varieties are replaced by commercial high-yield seeds.[19] In other words, seeds deeply rooted in specific landscapes

18 José Antonio Sierra-Huelsz et al., “Jalisco Beyond Tequila: Traditional Agave Spirits, Between Change and Agrobiodiversity Conservation,” in *Biodiversity Management and Domestication in the Neotropics*, edited by Alejandro Casas et al. (Cham: Springer, 2025), 1–46.

19 George A. Dyer, Alejandro López-Feldman, Antonio Yúnez-Naude, and J. Edward Taylor, “Genetic Erosion in Maize’s Center of Origin,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 39 (2014): 14094–99.

that hold unique culinary and cultural significance are being displaced by homogeneous seeds bred for productivity and profitability.

Traditional cooking, however, resists this logic, continuing to assign value to what the market does not by incorporating native ingredients into dishes. In addition to the practice of native seed preservation, we spoke with cooks who used *parota* flour, a foraged and wild-harvested ingredient not adaptable to conventional agribusiness cultivation. Several cooks also mentioned their use of *huitlacoche*, a fungus that grows naturally on maize, often used as a filling for tamales and quesadillas or added to soups and salsas. While *huitlacoche* is considered a delicacy by traditional cooks who prize its rich nutritional properties and distinct earthy flavour, in commercial production pesticides are used to eliminate the fungus because it limits yields and "contaminates" corn sold as a raw or semi-processed input for other food products.[20]

**Figure 3.** *Parota*, a native seed from Colima (photo by Regina Meza)

Traditional cuisine thus intimately connects what one eats with what is naturally accessible locally. In this way, traditional cooks are a force of resistance, drawing on their cultural and ecological knowledge that extends well beyond the kitchen to safeguard not only the diets of their communities but the biodiversity those diets rest on.

## Food As a Right Not a Commodity

In 1996, the international peasant movement *La Vía Campesina* coined the term "food sovereignty" as a tool of political struggle to challenge a food system increasingly dominated by large agribusiness and global trade demands, and to re-centre the "aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food" in food systems and policies. The movement defines food sovereignty as "the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems."[21]

Traditional cuisine is a means of asserting food sovereignty by emphasizing the ecologically sound production of nutritious food that is seasonal and native to the region. Moreover, traditional cuisine reflects diets shaped by a community's long-standing relationship with its land, thereby supporting healthy and culturally appropriate food options. This sets it apart from agribusiness, where market prices and demand drive production. A traditional cook from El Remate, with first-hand experience in avocado farming, spoke about the surge in avocado demand: "Everyone starts planting avocados" but, as she explained, the crop requires a lot of water, introduces pests that harm native species, and relies on heavy chemical use. She compared this with the native plants she tends on her rancho, which grow with minimal care and require no pesticides. Hence, whereas traditional cuisine fosters a sustainable relationship with the land, oriented toward sustaining its capacity to nourish communities and safeguarding the biocultural heritage rooted in it, agribusiness

20 Zuamí Villagrán et al. "Huitlacoche (*Ustilago maydis*), an Iconic Mexican Fungal Resource: Biocultural Importance, Nutritional Content, Bioactive Compounds, and Potential Biotechnological Applications," *Molecules* 28, no. 11 (2023): 4415.

21 What Is Food Sovereignty?" La Vía Campesina.

prioritizes short-term yields over the long-term health of the land.

> “Mexico, for example, grows high-quality organic coffee and cacao that transnational corporations purchase at prices that make these goods unaffordable for the very communities that grow them. Such export-oriented production treats food primarily as a commodity, but by preserving local customary diets, traditional cooks re-assert food as nourishment.

Agribusiness treats food as a commodity — produced in volume to be sold. This model orients agricultural production toward external markets and demand rather than local diets and needs. Jalisco, the state where much of our field research took place, is known as the “agri-food giant” given its leadership in agri-food production and export, particularly of berries, avocados, and agave products. These high-value cash crops depart sharply from the traditional *milpa* diet of local crops like maize, beans, and pumpkin, and are largely grown for foreign buyers. For instance, of the 598.7 million litres of tequila produced in 2023, roughly two-thirds (399.2 million litres) were destined for export.[22]

Food sovereignty rejects this market-first logic and aims to secure people’s right to control their own food and nutrition. The coordinator of a market for small local agricultural producers defined this concept as the right to feed and nourish oneself, one’s family, and one’s community first, with sale reserved for surplus. Food sovereignty then encompasses questions of who decides what is produced and for whom. Mexico, for example, grows high-quality organic coffee and cacao that transnational corporations purchase at prices that make these goods unaffordable for the very communities that grow them. Such export-oriented production treats food primarily as a commodity, but by preserving local customary diets, traditional cooks re-assert food as nourishment.

## Guardians and Transmitters of Embodied Knowledge

We found that, in the face of generational change and shifting economic conditions, traditional cooks resist cultural forgetting by acting as guardians of cultural knowledge across generations. Traditional cuisine is “a socially and historically constructed body of knowledge,” enriched across generations, binding together agriculture, diet, cultural traditions, and food-related techniques.[23] The cooks we spoke to carry this responsibility and explained how they do not conceive of themselves as owners of recipes but as guardians ensuring that the cuisine and its biocultural heritage could be preserved, enjoyed, and reproduced by younger generations.

When we asked cooks why it was so important to share their craft and teach others, they discussed the risk of the knowledge being lost with them. One shared that, at almost 80 years old, her “biggest wish is to leave a legacy. I don’t want recipes to get lost, and I hope that they remain generation after generation.” Another explained that she shared her culinary wisdom so that it is not lost, worrying that if she remains silent it “dies with me.” A third shared how she invited her grandchildren to cook with her

22 Jorge Velazco, “Cierra industria tequilera 2023 con casi 600 millones de litros de producción,” *El Informador*, 12 January 2024.

23 Juana María Meléndez Torres and Gloria María Cañez de la Fuente, “La cocina tradicional regional como un elemento de identidad y desarrollo local: el caso de San Pedro El Saucito, Sonora, México,” *Estudios Sociales: Revista de Alimentación Contemporánea y Desarrollo Regional* 17, no. 1 (2010): 181–204.

because, "What I learned, I want [them] to learn too, because that is what keeps things going."

For this reason, many of the cooks were deliberately teaching people beyond their own families, in schools and cultural centres. Many also shared that they had increasingly sought to teach young people, whose tastes, they felt, had become accustomed to ultra-processed food. A cook in Colima who was starting a workshop for kids to learn how to harvest and enjoy a traditional meal shared that most of the people who ate at her kitchen were elderly, so she questioned who would eat her food when her current patrons were "no longer here." Similarly, another shared that her objective was to establish a teaching space, or *escuelita*, to transmit her experiences to youth, rather than sell and serve food. As one of the academics we interviewed noted, this knowledge must travel beyond the family and the community into wider spaces to endure because "people cannot defend or care for what they do not know." Therefore, although cooks often learned to cook at home, they overwhelmingly understand their knowledge of traditional cuisine to be a shared cultural patrimony and heritage that is preserved through their efforts to share and diffuse it.

Traditional cooks are particularly important in this transmission because the craft of traditional cuisine cannot be documented in a recipe book — it is a form of *embodied* knowledge. Nearly all of the cooks we spoke to described learning to cook through years of watching and doing; written instructions were not part of how they learned or taught. A cook emphasized the importance of repeated practice, "you learn by watching, and eventually, you make it your own as you keep learning." One cook shared that she has always transmitted recipes orally and cannot provide "exact quantities because it's mostly eyeballing." Another emphasized the sensory nature of cooking: "when you engage all five senses, you can truly grasp it [the dish] and pass it on." Traditional cooks, then, understand their expertise as built over years of daily practice and lived experience that no written record can fully reproduce. Precisely because this knowledge is kept alive through person-to-person transmission and years of practice, traditional cuisine is especially vulnerable to being lost or straying from tradition.

The transmission of culinary knowledge has historically been gendered, which reinforces the particular importance of women as its guardians. People tend to recall and make sense of their own cooking through learning "at our mother's side," where culinary knowledge is passed on from mother to child in the home.[24] This casts women as the primary teachers of domestic skills and contributes to the intergenerational reproduction of women's central role in family cooking. As one interviewee noted, it is "thanks to the fact that women dedicated themselves fully to this [the kitchen]" and to the reality that for generations they "had no access to other opportunities, had no right to study, had no right to leave the house, that all of these practices were able to develop." Traditional cooking, then, has been developed, sustained, and practised largely by women, which makes them essential actors in preserving it.

**Figure 4.** A traditional cook kneading tortilla dough using techniques learned from childhood (photo by Vera Allue)

## From Domestic Labour to a Recognized Livelihood

Traditional cooks have revalued their work and knowledge as a livelihood and a recognized form of

24 Merin Oleschuk, "Gender, Cultural Schemas, and Learning to Cook," *Gender and Society* 33, no. 4 (2019): 607–28.

cultural preservation. Preparing food has long been "women's work and a daily occupation devoid of cultural recognition, shrouded in social invisibility," both essential to everyday life yet systematically undervalued. [25] Although the cooks we interviewed spoke with passion about traditional cuisine and with fondness about their time cooking, for many years this culinary work was unrecognized and confined to the home.

**Figure 5.** A traditional cook in her kitchen and long-time member of Mujeres del Fuego in her kitchen (photo by Regina Meza)

Many cooks shared that their culinary work moved into the public sphere out of necessity, for example, when a husband, the household's primary earner, became unable to work. A cook from Colima explained how cooking became essential to support her family once her husband became ill: "I started doing the work I knew how to do." A cook in Tequila shared that she began selling sandwiches, *gorditas*, and *tacos* after moving her family to the town for her children's schooling, where costs are higher. Many initially sold popular rather than traditional food, and the work was at first largely transactional. Still, by moving into the public sphere, their culinary knowledge opened new economic opportunities and sometimes served as a financial lifeline.

Mujeres del Fuego brought together traditional cooks, many of whom had initiated individual projects born out of financial necessity that propelled them into the public sphere. By engaging with the collective, many cooks reconceptualized the importance of their own knowledge and skills as more than mere sustenance and daily household labour — as the defence of irreplaceable biocultural heritage — thus expanding their efforts to share and transmit Colimota traditional cuisine.

# Mujeres del Fuego

Emerging in Colima as a collective of traditional cooks, the group chose a name that honours the region's most emblematic natural asset: the *Volcán de Fuego* (Volcano of Fire). Conceived in 2016 as a pedagogical project to study Comala's culinary traditions, the group began when Gladys Espinoza visited her grandmother, an experience that inspired her to create a regional journey she called "*el paseo de la abuela*" (the grandmother's walk). During this visit, numerous women opened their kitchens to generously share their culinary wisdom and practices passed down through generations.

Over time, the initiative expanded across Colima, welcoming more women and recognizing the diversity of culinary knowledge, techniques, and traditions throughout the state. Thus, what began as a small group of cooks has rapidly evolved into a collective of 19 traditional cooks spanning different generations, educational backgrounds, and culinary trajectories.

As Gladys Espinoza notes: "If someone wants to visit Mujeres del Fuego, it means travelling through different communities." The collective is not centralized but instead a network of independent projects. Since 2016, the members have maintained their professional independence, while joining forces as the collective to share their culinary knowledge, increase the visibility of their work, and support one another. By branding their individual establishments with the collective's logo, Mujeres del Fuego's reach extends to every individual member.

25 Meléndez Torres and Cañez de la Fuente, "La cocina tradicional regional,"189–90.

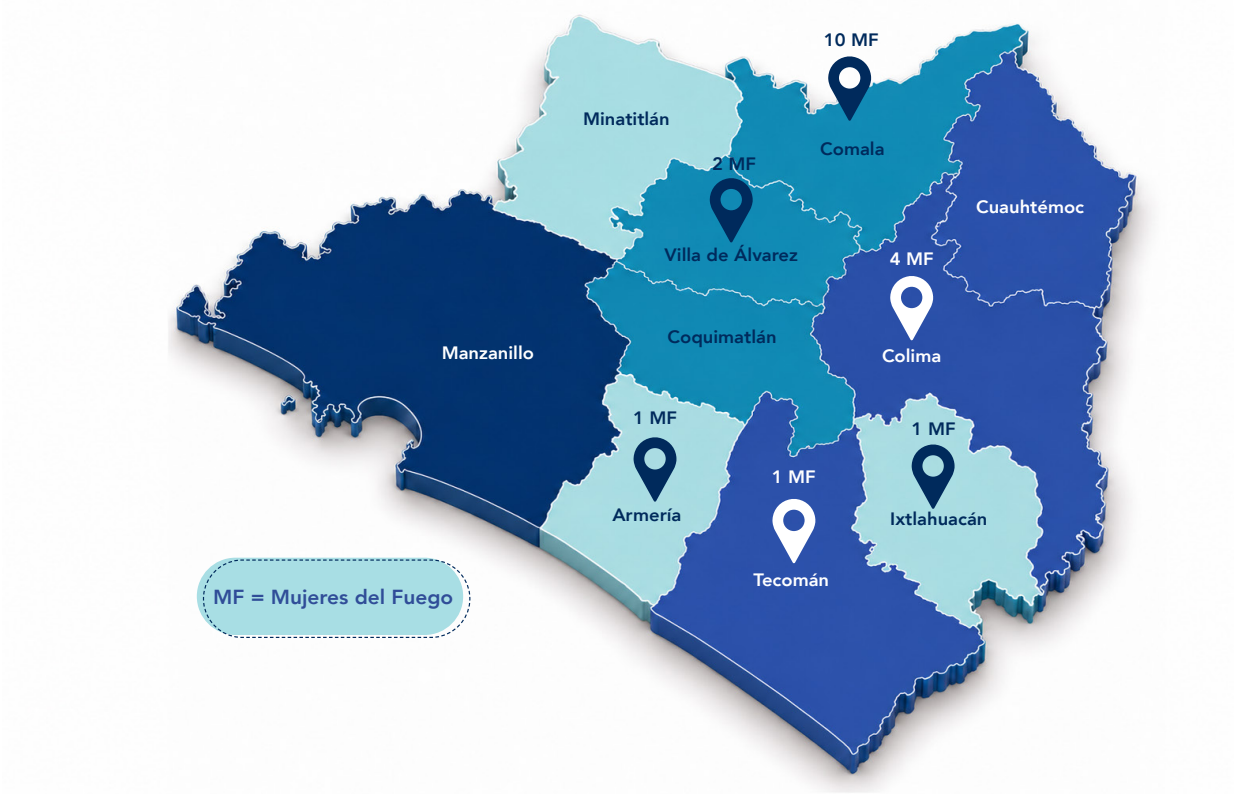



**Figure 6.** Map of Colima showing the number of Mujeres del Fuego (MF) in each municipality

Beyond such independence, members share fundamental principles regarding traditional cuisine. They understand the land as a living, nurturing entity, which drives them to respect each food's seasonality. In their kitchens, they also maintain inherited tools such as clay pots, *metates*,[26] *comales*,[27] and *fogones*,[28] elements indispensable for lending identity and unique flavours to their food.

Sustaining this shared vision requires a wide range of activities where no single role overshadows the rest. Their self-published book *Mujeres del Fuego: Saberes y Sabores de Colima* categorizes members into three groups:

- *producers*, who cultivate vegetables and fruits to elaborate and commercialize market products under their own brand

**Figure 7.** A distinctive symbol of a Mujeres del Fuego kitchen (photo by Regina Meza)

26 A traditional grinding stone made from volcanic rock, consisting of a rectangular stone slab supported by three or four legs, used to grind grains, seeds, spices, and other ingredients by hand.

27 A flat, round griddle traditionally used in Mexican cuisine to cook food directly over an open fire.

28 A traditional Mexican *fogón* is a rustic, wood-fired stove, often the centrepiece of the home where families gather to share meals.

**Figure 8.** The kitchen of a traditional cook in Ahualulco de Mercado (left) and the kitchen of a traditional cook in Colima (photos by Vera Allue and Regina Meza)

- *cooks*, who manage their own kitchens, restaurants, or *fondas*[29]
- *teachers*, who lead culinary courses and workshops.[30]

These roles are not mutually exclusive since individual members often fulfill multiple roles.

To finance their travel and knowledge-sharing initiatives, the collective organizes specialized workshops, establishes institutional partnerships, and commercializes their products. Investments made by the collective are shared equally among its members, ensuring that improvements benefit everyone individually and as a group. The collective organizes through committees that, though not strictly formalized, divide responsibilities according to individual strengths and on a voluntary basis. While this structure is still evolving, they maintain a firm commitment to a horizontal approach where decision-making power is shared equally. As one cook reminded the group, "the solution is not in me, it is in each one of us."

Ultimately, Mujeres del Fuego keeps ancestral knowledge alive by ensuring women's culinary and cultural contributions are visible and valued. For them, safeguarding Colima's biocultural heritage is not just about recipes; it is the result of years of shared commitment, solidarity, and resilience.

## Collective Impact

By preserving and sharing their traditional culinary heritage, Mujeres del Fuego has transformed its members' lives. As a collaborative network, it has fostered a space where, together, they transition away from generations of undervalued labour toward finding their voice.

**Internal impact on the collective: sisterhood, solidarity, and the re-imagining of care.** Beyond a professional network, the collective has built a bond of sisterhood, helping members navigate personal and professional challenges. For these women, preparing food is an intentional act of care and hospitality:

> On my first journey [to connect with traditional cooks in the region], my daughter was only forty days old. Right

29 Small, family-run restaurants where owners take responsibility for all tasks, including sourcing ingredients, cooking, and cleaning. They serve *comida corrida*, which is a low-cost menu served during lunchtime.

30 A. Delgadillo Grajeda, *Mujeres del Fuego: Saberes y Sabores de Colima* (2020)

> after our talk, the first lady who took me in told me, "I made chicken broth for you." Then, just six hundred metres ahead, another chicken soup. I tried five different chicken soups that day, and at the end of it all, I ended up eating chicken soup with my mom, too. It was like a giant hug for my heart.

The collective has created a space where every member feels valued and supported, making them stronger together:

> Cooking started for me as a personal shelter ... I never worked with women before; it was always alone or with a group of men. As we started to know the dynamics of each one of us — some of us widows, others divorced, single moms — we started to become stronger. We created a family among ourselves.

Mujeres del Fuego believes there is no room for selfishness in their kitchens. This is why they freely share their recipes, utensils, and even financial resources. This approach was consolidated when they changed how they viewed their own work: "We are guardians, and our work is vital." This realization transformed their role from cooks to guardians of a living heritage, and as guardians, their bond is rooted in cooperation, not competition. As one member explained: "We are not competing with anyone. We are here to educate and re-educate together." Sharing their culture is a collective responsibility that requires everyone's cooperation.

This shared responsibility redefined their relationship with their guests. As one cook put it, "That's where the mindset changed for us. It went from 'sit down, I'll serve you, it's okay, just relax.' Now it's 'look, this is my family, this is my project, this is the mole, this is the history.'"

Ultimately, as one cook explained, "food also carries feelings," which naturally brings people together. Within the collective, they find the space to gather and honour the teachings of their elders, preserving their identity and ensuring the next generation remains connected to their origins — proving that "through food, you can transmit culture directly from what your ancestors have been teaching you."

This space of mutual empowerment also serves as a powerful form of resistance against a deeply rooted *machismo* (sexism) culture. By prioritizing working together, they have directly challenged the traditional gender norms and restrictions that seek to keep women isolated and unrecognized. As one member put it: "In Colima they say, '*Juntas ni difuntas*' [women can't be together even in death], and that is not true. Women absolutely can work as a group."

Beyond personal and financial growth, cooking has given them strength to support others. As their businesses grow, their goal is to provide employment and mentorship to other women. By helping others build their own paths, especially those facing the same hardships they once overcame, they create a community where women can thrive while defending their cultural and culinary heritage.

"Within the collective, they find the space to gather and honour the teachings of their elders, **preserving their identity** and ensuring the next generation remains connected to their origins — proving that "through food, you can transmit culture directly from what your ancestors have been teaching you."

**External impact of the collective: cultural resistance and re-education.** Members of Mujeres del Fuego actively resist a food system focused on convenience rather than nourishment, embodying the core of the "slow food" movement: "There is a certain hunger we have, not just to eat, but to nourish."

> "Members of Mujeres del Fuego actively resist a food system focused on convenience rather than nourishment, embodying the core of the **"slow food" movement:** "There is a certain hunger we have, not just to eat, but to nourish."

This resistance is vital as modern farming and market trends push for aggressive land use, replacing diverse ecosystems with commercial monocultures that deplete land and water resources. As one cook puts it: "The land is not the same; everything tastes different." This crisis extends to the ocean, where overfishing and rising ocean temperatures threaten marine life. A cook from coastal Colima shared: "The sea is different; it's not like the old days when you could just pull out fish."

To preserve their cultural and culinary heritage, the collective aims to re-educate taste buds, primarily of younger generations. To engage children, they involve them in the entire process from tending the soil to cooking, letting them "do it with their own hands." For youth and adults, they use nostalgia, triggering memories through familiar scents: "You can touch someone's heart through an aroma; they'll tell me, 'Oh, this scent reminds me of my grandmother.'" Together, these practices foster a lasting appreciation for traditional culinary practices across generations.

## Public Autonomy: Dismantling Traditional and Restrictive Gender Roles Through Local Resistance

Beyond preserving culture, Mujeres del Fuego has transformed how people around them view their work. Many started with strict limitations at home, recalling when a member would say, "My husband won't let me go out." Today, that dynamic has shifted: "Now, the husband is part of the Mujeres del Fuego team — now, they are the ones accompanying us."

On a broader scale, their cooking is a powerful declaration of independence within the culinary industry that often sidelines traditional cooks for lacking formal education. As the industry values expensive, modern restaurants led by renowned chefs, traditional cooking is viewed as "cheap." Younger generations sometimes reject traditional foods because of their association with past economic hardship.

Despite facing institutional pushback for not fitting the conventional culinary mold and a society that undervalues these traditions, their conviction remains firm: "We see ourselves as independent and deeply resistant. We have had events boycotted, but we lean on our friends and connections to keep going." Overcoming the skepticism that surrounded them, they refused to let fear dictate what they would do together as a collective. "When you step into the kitchen to cook, do not do it with fear. Let nothing be done out of fear or shame."

## Amplifying their Voices: National and International Recognition

Mujeres del Fuego has brought unprecedented recognition to Colima's culinary legacy by sharing local knowledge and traditions globally. Through sustained dedication, the collective has carried their regional identity far beyond home, bringing Colima's flavours to people across Mexico, Europe, and Asia.

This legacy is captured in the reflection of one Mujeres del Fuego member: "I am deeply convinced that there is a Colima before Mujeres del Fuego, and a completely different one after."

**Figure 9.** Amplifying their voices: national and international recognition

Beyond participating in culinary events, Mujeres del Fuego promotes the preservation and appreciation of Colima's gastronomic heritage through cooking demonstrations, workshops, and cultural exchanges. During international engagements, members of the collective have introduced authentic Colima cuisine to new diners while remaining committed to traditional preparation methods. One cook recalled her experience in Italy, where many participants were unfamiliar with cilantro and did not initially enjoy its flavour. As she explained, "I told them Mexican tacos come with cilantro," insisting that the dish be prepared in its authentic form because preserving its traditional ingredients is an essential part of sharing Mexico's culinary heritage. Such interactions illustrate how the collective not only shares traditional recipes but also techniques and ingredients that define Colima's culture.

To navigate their growing influence, the collective has strengthened its organizational capacity by developing written clauses that define its objectives, membership criteria, and shared principles. These guidelines emphasize respect and collaboration, and ensure that each cook's individual project and goals remain compatible with the collective's shared vision. As one member noted regarding this shift, "Before, everything was a 'yes'." But today, they carefully select only the opportunities that align with their values, recognizing the financial and cultural value of their work.

# Lessons Learned

Mujeres del Fuego shows that traditional cooking is a practical response to some of the pressures facing communities today: the loss of food knowledge, the spread of fast and standardized food, the undervaluing of women's labour, and the difficulty of earning a dignified income from cultural work. The collective does not solve all of these problems at once. Its members are clear that their work progresses slowly and it is often undersupported. But their experience shows that when traditional cooks organize themselves, cooking can become more than a domestic responsibility. It can become a source of income, recognition, education, and resistance.

## Redefining Fair Pay

Mujeres del Fuego shows that income generation matters, for reasons other than bringing money into the household. For many traditional cooks, the knowledge they carry has long been treated as "ordinary" women's work, or as labour hired by others. The collective changes this perception. By teaching workshops, joining collaborations, participating in gastronomic showcases, consulting, and commercializing products, the cooks turn inherited knowledge into recognized work. These activities generate value beyond bringing income into the household: they give public legitimacy to women's expertise and role as cultural guardians.

This is especially important because many women entered the collective from conditions of economic uncertainty, informal work, or limited formal education. In these contexts, income generated through this culinary expertise is a lifeline. One cook described investing what she earned back into improvements in her kitchen. Another spoke about

wanting her business to grow so she could provide occasional job opportunities to low-income women in her community. These examples show that the benefits of income generation are not limited to the individual cook, but also support families, create jobs, improve kitchen spaces, and give women more control over their own work.

## Honouring Cultural Guardianship and Identity

Mujeres del Fuego shows that income generation can become risky when traditional knowledge is commercialized without attention to fairness, credit, or respect. The cooks described learning that there was not always fair pay or recognition for their work. As one cook explained, "I am no longer going to gift my work. I have already gifted it a lot and I have never received a reciprocal response." She emphasized, "We are not asking for charity — simply that they come and value our work … and that they pay a fair price." Traditional cuisine is often expected to be cheap because it is associated with smoke, fire, and rural kitchens rather than restaurants or luxury spaces, even though the labour, ingredients, and knowledge behind it are deeply valuable. Over time, the collective has learned to protect this value.

"Traditional cuisine is often expected to be cheap because it is associated with smoke, fire, and rural kitchens rather than restaurants or luxury spaces, even though the labour, ingredients, and knowledge behind it are deeply valuable. Over time, the collective has learned to protect this value.

For example, where collaborations may once have relied on verbal promises, Mujeres del Fuego has moved toward written agreements and clearer expectations, especially when money, credit, or public visibility are involved. Their collaborations have ranged from individual researchers and educational institutions to companies, but the lesson has been the same: sharing knowledge requires clear terms. The collective now asks who benefits, what will be paid, who will be credited, and whether the relationship respects the women behind the food.

This has also meant learning when to say no. Some forms of support, including from government actors, have come with conditions that would limit the collective's independence or place outsiders in positions of influence over their work. Refusing these arrangements is part of how Mujeres del Fuego safeguards its identity. Protecting cultural knowledge does not mean refusing to share it. It means sharing it on terms that recognize the people, places, and histories that make it possible.

## Fostering Autonomy and Self-determination

A third lesson is that endurance depends on organizing and collaboration — income and recognition do not fully explain why Mujeres del Fuego has endured. The collective's strength lies in how they have learned to organize, trust, disagree, support, and represent one another. That ability to choose collaborations and demand proper recognition did not happen automatically; it grew from the collective identity Mujeres del Fuego built over time.

Each cook joined Mujeres del Fuego with a different background, goal, and at a different time, united under the common objective of sharing their culinary knowledge. In conversation with Gladys, we heard how, during the early days of the collective, there was a competitive process to assign specialties to each cook, be it an ingredient or a recipe. The women would choose the member who prepared the specific food best to commercialize it under

the collective's brand. Nowadays, each member contributes with either an ingredient, a product, or a technique, preventing the cooks from viewing each other as competitors.

The collective's success stems from the women's persistence. Mutual support was also key in building collective resilience. For many cooks, leaving Colima to represent the collective involved getting on a plane and being away from their families for the first time. Not only did the collective financially support participation in national or international showcases, but it also provided members with emotional support to take on these opportunities to expand their work. Alongside this support, the division of responsibilities has also been essential to their success.

While knowledge of traditional cuisine is critical, it is not sufficient for ensuring the collective's financial sustainability. Instead, the cooks have recognized the need for upskilling and better budgeting to carry out their activities. They have recently engaged in workshops offered by collaborators to enhance event organization and food presentation, aiming for excellence in the delivery of their services. In addition to the fundamentals of budgeting and how to set prices, this includes culinary details like how to adjust the quantities provided according to the type of offering or food experience. As a cook mentioned, they are "used to cooking in large quantities," significantly more than the amount of food typically served in tasting menus. Hence, the cooks' engagement in skill-building workshops is helping them understand how much they must invest and earn through their activities.

Endurance also means learning which partnerships are worth pursuing. Fair pay for cooks' time and expertise, as well as photo and publication credit, are the minimum agreed-upon standards. The founding members' experience navigating partnerships prevented past mistakes from recurring and served as a reliable filter for building trustworthy future alliances.

Mujeres del Fuego holds together individual projects, different rhythms, and a shared desire to keep knowledge alive. Members' future projects take various forms, ranging from consulting and teaching to opening restaurants and building brands. Despite these varying individual endeavours, cooking and sharing knowledge will remain at the forefront of their work.

The group partners effectively with organizations and universities, as shown by its enduring relationship with Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO), a university in Guadalajara. The collective has collaborated with groups of graduate students from ITESO by co-creating innovative solutions to problems the collective faces. Examples of these projects' outcomes include assistance commercializing Mujeres del Fuego products through product design and labels containing nutritional information, as well as plaques that identify establishments owned by a member of the collective.

**Figure 10.** Collaborative work with students and faculty from the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO)

Given the growing recognition of Mujeres del Fuego, its members are also aware of the need to build capacity to meet growing demand for services. While dividing work voluntarily through committees has been an effective strategy so far, several cooks have other responsibilities beyond the kitchen, such as raising children, caring for older family

**Figure 11.** A traditional dish prepared by a traditional cook (photo by Vera Allue)

members, working at multiple jobs, and managing household errands. One cook illustrated this struggle by sharing, “when my dad got injured, I had to take on his job and also take care of the children” while remaining involved with the collective’s work. Balancing individual projects, collective work, and personal life is an ongoing challenge to ensuring the collective’s long-term sustainability.

Mujeres del Fuego has created a clear “before and after” vision for Colima. Their impact stretches beyond the kitchen. They persist in reaching the hardest to reach — the newer generations. Reaching a generation born into fusion flavours, imported products, ultra-processed foods, and the pressure of modern life is no easy task, but the collective’s strength lies in their ability to disseminate traditional knowledge and share their passion for cooking with purpose. Their hope is for the coming generations to continue their work and legacy. As one cook explained, “When you get kids to try something made in the community and harvested in the field, children need to start getting to know the textures and flavours, and children start recognizing the collective.” Ultimately, food is more than nourishment. Food shapes identity and belonging, serving as a living record of where we come from.

For consumers, the lesson is simple: food choices are never neutral. A dish carries much more than flavour. It carries the labour of the cook, the cost of ingredients, the condition of the land in which they were grown, the knowledge of farmers, and the histories of families and communities. Supporting traditional cuisine therefore requires more than enjoying it as an experience. It requires asking who cooked and grew the food, whether they were paid fairly, where the ingredients came from, and whether the knowledge behind the dish is being respected. Mujeres del Fuego invites consumers to slow down and notice what is usually invisible: the firewood, the clay pot, the seed, the field, the hands making tortillas, the time it takes to cook, and the women whose knowledge makes the meal possible.

This also changes how we think about scaling impact. The lesson is not that every community should copy Mujeres del Fuego and expand the model. Traditional cuisine is rooted in place. The exact activities may not travel, but the principles behind them do: organize around women's knowledge, pay traditional cooks fairly, give credit by name, build partnerships carefully, protect recipes from extraction, create spaces for learning, and let each cook keep her own rhythm and identity while still belonging to something larger.

Mujeres del Fuego does not present tradition as static. The cooks adapt, travel, teach online, open businesses, consult on culinary projects, and share Colima beyond Mexico. Their work is a reminder that food sovereignty is not only about what is planted or eaten. It encompasses who gets to decide the value of food, who is recognized for carrying knowledge, and who benefits when tradition becomes visible. In that sense, the collective offers a powerful lesson: when women's culinary knowledge is organized, recognized, and compensated, it can nourish memory, land, identity, and community.

# Future Directions

The future directions from this case are aimed at several audiences: consumers, public institutions, universities and researchers, and schools. The lesson is not that traditional cooks should be asked to carry the survival of traditional cuisine alone. Their knowledge may begin in the kitchen and the field, but its future depends on whether others create the conditions for that knowledge to be valued, practised, and passed on.

For consumers, the direction is to move from appreciation to responsibility. This does not mean placing the burden of food-system change on individual choices. Rather, it means making it easier for people to understand where food comes from, who produces it, and what kinds of farming and knowledge their purchases help sustain. Consumers need more opportunities to access local, seasonal, and responsibly produced foods, and to recognize traditional cuisine as knowledge and labour.

The lessons from Mujeres del Fuego also point to what public institutions can do differently. Support for traditional cuisine should move beyond symbolic recognition and short-term promotional events. More useful would be consistent and practical support with transportation, infrastructure, and financing. Policymakers can also better recognize the food systems behind traditional cuisine, including small-scale producers, native seeds, and agroecological practices. This could include community-based verification systems that allow producers, consumers, and technical partners to recognize agroecological practices together, rather than relying only on costly formal certification.

Universities and researchers can also support this work, but only if partnerships are designed to benefit the communities whose knowledge makes the research possible. Future collaborations should avoid extracting stories, recipes, images, or knowledge without returning research findings in accessible formats, supporting grant or administrative processes, strengthening visibility on the collective's own terms, and ensuring that cooks are credited and compensated for their time and expertise.

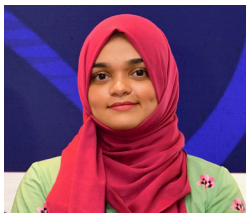
Environmental protection must also remain central. Traditional cuisine depends on biodiversity and the health of native ecosystems. Climate change, monoculture, market demand, and the overuse of natural resources are already changing what can be grown, harvested, and cooked. Protecting a dish therefore also means protecting the ecosystem that produces its ingredients. This includes native seed preservation, support for small-scale producers, and recognition that biodiversity is inseparable from cultural heritage.

Perhaps the most important initiative is to help younger people build a relationship with food before traditional knowledge becomes unfamiliar to them. The cooks did not call for children simply to memorize recipes. They wanted them to recognize ingredients, enjoy tasting the food, understand ingredients' seasonality, and know the food context of the place where they live. Schools could create opportunities for students to learn directly from cooks and producers through gardens, cooking demonstrations, and hands-on workshops. Young

people are more likely to care when learning is participatory, joyful, and rooted in their own culture.

The goal is not to ask younger generations to live exactly as their grandparents did. It is to give them enough knowledge to make informed decisions, enough awareness to recognize what is at stake, and enough confidence to carry these traditions forward in their own way. Traditional cuisine will survive not because it is preserved behind glass but because it continues to be cooked, questioned, adapted, and shared. If the next generation can still recognize the smell of firewood, the feel of a seed in their hands, the taste of an ingredient in season, and the stories carried in a family dish, then this knowledge will remain alive. Mujeres del Fuego is protecting memory, land, dignity, and the possibility of connecting to one's community and land.

# Research Team



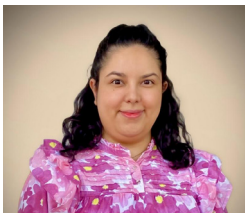
**Narjis Fatima Hussain** is a second-year doctoral candidate in nutritional sciences at the University of Toronto's Temerty Faculty of Medicine, with a collaborative specialization in global health. Her research examines how postnatal heat exposure affects maternal and infant health, nutrition, and lactation through a systematic review and a mixed-methods cohort study in rural Pakistan. She has experience in global public health research, including multi-country studies, grant development, qualitative research, and the co-design of community-based interventions.

**Vera Allue Iberico** is a third-year undergraduate student at the University of Toronto Mississauga, specializing in economics and environmental law and policy. She represented the University of Toronto at the annual UN Climate Change Conference in Baku, Azerbaijan, and has led climate-awareness campaigns in schools across Peru, Spain, Romania, and Canada. A researcher with the Lawson Climate Institute, Vera is exploring innovative climate pedagogies to strengthen student agency in postsecondary education. She was also invited to the UN headquarters to participate in the ECOSOC Youth Forum, contributing to international discussions on sustainable development.

**Manuela Monteiro Vieira** recently graduated from the University of Toronto, with a dual bachelor's degree in psychology and cognitive science. She currently works with the Canadian Cancer Society's advocacy team, where she conducts quantitative and qualitative research, including study design, interview guide development, data analysis, and manuscript preparation for publication. Beyond academia, Manuela serves as associate founder of the ReFloresta Movement, a Brazilian nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting youth engagement in Amazon rainforest conservation and Indigenous-led initiatives. Through this work, she developed strong cultural competency and community engagement skills while collaborating with rural and Indigenous communities.

**Lara Devotto Pimenta** recently completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto, where she studied international relations, public policy, and political science. As a design researcher at the University of Toronto's Innovation Hub and an assessment and strategic initiatives assistant at Hart House, she gained experience in participant outreach, stakeholder interviewing, and qualitative data analysis by assisting initiatives broadly aimed at improving the campus experience for the university community. During her undergraduate studies, Lara also completed pro bono programs with Propel Impact and the IBM Ontario Pro Bono Initiative, where she co-developed actionable recommendations for a foundation supporting women's financial independence and a nonprofit's youth mental health services.

**María Regina Meza Sánchez** holds dual bachelors' degrees in law and international relations from Tecnológico de Monterrey with a particular interest in governance, gender equality, and social development. She practised international human rights litigation and legal advocacy as a semifinalist at the Inter-American Human Rights Moot Court Competition (CEJA) in Costa Rica. She also led student initiatives promoting the empowerment of women and girls, including Girl Up and HeForShe. Her research has been recognized with the 2025 Legal Research Award from the School of Social Sciences. She works within the executive secretariat of the Municipal Government of Monterrey, contributing to institutional management and strategic public-sector projects.



**Dulce Maria Solis Arana** is a medical graduate from Tecnológico de Monterrey, conducting research in medical sociology. She has collaborated on projects examining social determinants of migrant health, human dignity in medical education, obstetric violence, and hospital workplace violence. Her work bridges medicine and social sciences to explore how structural dimensions shape healthcare delivery. She links food sovereignty to community well-being, approaching traditional cooking practices not just as cultural heritage, but as vital systems of preventative medicine and resilience, enriching the study of how women-led food autonomy directly shapes health outcomes.

**Erica Di Ruggiero** is an associate professor of global health and director of the Centre for Global Health at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto. She is also the director of the Collaborative Specialization in Global Health and cross-appointed to the Institute of Health Policy Management and Evaluation. Di Ruggiero has an extensive background in global public health systems and nutrition, having obtained a BSc in nutritional sciences, a master of health science in community nutrition, and a PhD in public health sciences from the University of Toronto. A global public health systems and policy researcher, her research focuses on evaluating the health, gender, and health equity impacts of policy and program interventions on marginalized groups, such as labour policies and food insecurity interventions. She is also interested in assessing governance effectiveness of global institutions and public health systems in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals. Di Ruggiero is the editor-in-chief for *Global Health Promotion* and has been recognized for her outstanding accomplishments, contributions, and leadership throughout her 15 years with the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), specifically its Institute of Population and Public Health.

**Gregorio Leal Martínez** has worked since 2003 with rural and urban organizations on issues related to social and solidarity economy and food sovereignty in Mexico and Argentina. He has designed methodologies and tools to support organizations on issues related to production, consumption, credit and savings, and the creation of value chains. Gregorio joined ITESO in 2019 and works at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Education and Social Outreach (CIFOVIS) in training processes linked to social relevance and the articulation of social and solidarity economy processes. He holds a bachelor of science in education from ITESO University, with a specialization in popular education, and a master's in social economy from the National University of General Sarmiento in Argentina.

**Iza María Sánchez Siller** is a professor in the Department of Humanistic Studies at the School of Humanities and Education, Tecnológico de Monterrey. Her academic and professional work focuses on social development from sociological and legal perspectives, with particular emphasis on gender, violence, and internal migration. For over eight years, she has collaborated on projects with Indigenous communities in the Monterrey Metropolitan Area. Between 2017 and 2019, she coordinated the Semester I Program in the Leadership for Social Development modality, a recognized initiative that promotes student-led social impact projects in marginalized urban contexts. Since 2018, she has directed the program "Promoting Gender Equity among Adolescents and Youth in Rural Areas" in Kenya, aimed at strengthening educational capacities to address gender-based violence and human development. Currently, she serves as the coordinator of the Reach Alliance at Tecnológico de Monterrey, where she mentors interdisciplinary teams conducting research and innovation projects aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.

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