

# Two Cakes Say It All

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IN 1881 THE DENVER AND RIO GRANDE RAILROAD ESTABLISHED ANTONITO ON THE LINE FROM SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO TO ALAMOSA, COLORADO. IT IS ON THE WESTERN SIDE OF THE SOUTHERN SAN LUIS VALLEY, A COLD DESERT VALLEY THAT LIES BETWEEN 7,500 TO 8,000 FEET (2,300-2,400 METERS), FROM THE SANGRE DE CRISTO AND SAN JUAN MOUNTAINS. ANTONITO WAS THE RAILROAD DEPOT, MARKET TOWN AND COMMERCIAL CENTER OF A PREDOMINANTLY HISPANIC REGION THAT HAD BEEN SETTLED IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY BY PEOPLE VARIOUSLY CALLED SPANISH-AMERICANS, HISPANOS, OR MEXICANOS.

At Anthony's fourteenth birthday party in the small town of Antonito in the southern San Luis Valley of Colorado, there were two



cakes. One was a store-bought chocolate cake with white sugar frosting from the local Hometown supermarket, and the other was a homemade 'Hummingbird cake' with pineapple, nuts, cinnamon and peanut butter frosting made by Anthony's grandmother, Asuncionita. The two cakes sat side by side with Anthony's fourteen

candles spread between them, symbolizing contemporary cuisine in this Hispanic community: a cuisine spread along a continuum of traditional 'Spanish' or '*Mexicano*' cooking, 'American' or 'An-

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glo' dishes, and processed and prepared foods from the global industrialized food economy. Different families eat at different points on the continuum, consuming at different times of the day or year foods that range from the age-old staples of beans, chile, and potatoes, through stews, roast meats, hamburgers, macaroni, hotdogs, frozen pizza, and myriad other foods both homemade and processed.

I have been studying foodways in Antonito since 1996 and have conducted over fifty interviews with twenty-five residents of the town to document and understand their changing diet and culture.<sup>1</sup> The earliest settlers practiced a farming and ranching economy in the relatively fertile and well-watered valleys of the Conejos, San Antonio, and Los Pinos Rivers. The diet was rooted in *Mexicano* culinary traditions adapted to the local ecology, high altitude, and cold climate. Older people described the dietary staples of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century as potatoes, beans and chile supplemented by meat, vegetables, wheat tortillas and bread. In summer they grew gardens with a wide variety of vegetables and fruits, including radishes, lettuce, turnips, carrots, onions, corn, turnips, rutabagas,



potatoes, wax beans, string beans, green beans, peas, *bolita* beans, *habas* beans, cabbage, cauliflower, pumpkins, squash, *calabacitas* (small round green squashes), rhubarb, strawberries, raspberries, crabapples, and apricots.

#### The woman's role

Many women dried, canned and stored in root cellars the garden produce. As 40-year-old Monica said, 'Whatever came out of that garden is what you ate the next winter'. Women also gathered many wild plant foods, especially *champes* (rosehips), asparagus, *capulines* (chokecherries), *verdolagas* (purslane) and the ubiquitous *quelites* or lamb's quarters.

Many people named meat as an important dietary staple, past and present. 80-year-old Ramona, speaking of the 1920s and 1930s, said of her family: 'We were all meat lovers, and potato lovers. Mother would fry together potatoes and meat, or beans and meat, always some type of meat'. 32-year-old Martha said she served meat at every meal if she could. She and others still ate local meat— especially beef from relatives' cattle, and venison or elk hunted by family members. Martha, her parents, her



Alex Webb, Magnum/Contrasto

four siblings, and their families ate beef raised on the family ranch: 'We all pitch in money to get it butchered and then we are able to get meat whenever we want to use it ... So we have meat for all of our meals'.

66-year-old Teddy's natal family did not raise cattle, but her father hunted elk every year, and her husband continued this tradition: 'My husband Vincent was big time with hunting until his heart gave out. He would trek over all those mountains and every season assured us that we were going to have elk and deer and fish ... So I always have venison and elk in my freezer ... The elk took the place of beef in every situation for us'. Many men hunted game and a few raised cattle, sheep, and pigs for consumption.



But opportunities to eat local plant foods were far more rare.

#### Potatoes only

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, few people grew more than flowers and a little grass in their yards and they rarely ate wild foods. Most people shopped

at Antonito's locally owned Hometown market or at big chain supermarkets in Alamosa, thirty miles north. Plant foods came from far afield — California, Florida, Mexico and South America. The only local vegetables regularly available in Antonito were potatoes. In the late summer Hometown Market sold and roasted green chile from New Mexico as well as melons from Rocky Ford, Colorado, 180 miles east. Occasional vendors from northern New Mexico would sell by the roadside or door-to-door local honey, red chile, green chile, piñon nuts, chicos (dried corn), peaches and other foods. The new Salazar Trading Post in Antonito sold some local foods: potatoes, tamales, meat, atole (blue corn meal), panocha (sprouted wheat flour) and bolita beans. From July through early October, the Saturday Farmers' Market in Alamosa sold a variety of fresh fruits, vegetables and herbs.

People in Antonito continued to eat regularly but not exclusively what they called *Mexicano* or Spanish foods, and also ate what they called 'Anglo' or 'American' foods, which were fully integrated into the diet. They also ate processed, prepared, canned, frozen and restaurant food, especially fast food. These three strains formed the hybrid diet of contemporary Antonito.

### **Anthony's birthday party**

The hybrid Antonito diet was revealed not only in the two cakes at Anthony's fourteenth birthday, but in the whole meal. His mother Martha and step-father Joe cooked a feast for around 30 relatives and friends that included a range of food. There were hamburgers and hotdogs, potato salad, hominy, pigs' trotters in red chile, beans with queritos (pork rinds), green chile, burritos with pork, flour tortillas, potato chips, soda pop, Kool Aid and lemonade. At the party many people ate foods all along the continuum, as they did throughout the year.

Martha, for example, said they usually ate bacon and eggs or cereal for breakfast, something quick like frozen pizza, hot dogs or sandwiches for lunch, and a more substantial meal for dinner. She said, 'Usually our main big meal is for supertime ... We always have chile it seems like. It's kind of slowed down now for the summer, but always in the winter, we crave chile all the time, so it's either potatoes and chile, or one of Joe's favorites is fried potatoes with fried hamburger and mix that with red chile ... We usually have potatoes in our meal ... We cook things that we would be able to make big portions of like, for instance, what we call *caldito* in Spanish. It's like a soup with potatoes and hamburger and then you add water to it, kind of like a stew, but not with the vegetables'. Martha's and other families would also make spaghetti, prepare salads, barbecue steaks or hamburgers, cook roasts of beef or elk, bake a ham or turkey, and eat potatoes mashed, baked, fried, or in potato salad.

The content of meals had changed over time and reflected changes in people's relation to the natural environment and to labor. Forty-year old Monica encapsulated the San Luis Valley food system of the past when she cited her grandmother saying, 'Anything you want is going to come from the earth'. But today in Antonito, little that people eat comes from the land near their homes. Fruit and vegetables come from Texas, California, Mexico, Chile, and across the globe and draw the people into a global system. They do, however, express enthusiasm for local foods and commitment to eating them when possible. They try to balance local with global, homemade with processed, and traditional cultural foods with new ones, forging a compromise like that expressed in Anthony's two birthday cakes.

*My deep gratitude goes to the people of Antonito for giving me their time, knowledge, and friendship.*