Amasijo, Acorns, Aurajoki: A Recipe That Calls for a River*

By María Villa

In the kitchen of the Saari art studios on a cold and sunny autumn day, Martina starts talking about the work she and Carmen have been doing for the past two months. She is holding in her hands the result of weeks of experimentation and research: a jelly crafted from local acorns. I had no idea the oak nuts were edible. It turns out that oaks, a notorious tree species in Mexico, is a surprising Finnish forest outlier.

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When they started asking about oaks to Finnish foragers they found oaks were once an important local source of food here, but the knowledge about it has been lost over time. The acorns have a great deal of tannins that make them very bitter to humans, so traditionally people would shell them and put them in a sack and submerge them in a local stream of water. “You need to let the water run on them for three days to wash off the astringency. The seeds are then mashed and strained to extract a milk that then sits for a day, until you get the starch to make the tofu.”

Martina explained she learnt this from an agroforestry professor, and in 2022 found the acorn jelly, the *dotori-muk*, is an ancient staple dish in Korea, where people still make it at home. The delicate brown disk she has just turned out on a linen is her last outcome after several tries. As we eat it seasoned inside a fresh green salad that brings together subtle tangy flavors, she admits to her renewed delight in witnessing how the forest can feed us in the least expected ways. And she adds, “I had never come across a recipe that called for a river! You are talking about food that needs an ecosystem, a healthy ecosystem.”

In Spanish, “amasijo” is a roughly-shaped mass, a bundle with no predefined shape. For the collective, this is a metaphor for their ways of coming together: they join and split organically, according to the territories and practices they each belong to. Carmen and Martina, mother and daughter, blend their backgrounds in literature, cultural biology, collaborative knowledge, economics, and agroforestry thanks to a grounding meeting place: the complex systems of everyday life. They formed colectivo amasijo as they started working with the women of another local family, putting together seven pairs of hands and three generations, and activating in the process a knowledge exchange and a support network that has brought about means for subsistence for the families, a life-long research project, and many discoveries. They have been working together over a decade in the intersections of ancestral knowledge on growing and preparing food, and questions of sustainable coexistence in Mexico.

The collective rises from the will to care, conserve, and celebrate; creating the conditions to reflect on the origin and diversity of food, de-hierarchizing knowledge and focusing on “doings” (*haceres*) as ways of learning. They listen to the narratives of women close to the land—non-dominant narratives—and cook collectively. Through food, the interdependence of language, culture, and territory is understood as a network of relationships.

Landing in Turku

When they received the invitation to come to Saari, they had little information about the Finnish nature or the history of the land. But they were immediately drawn by the idea of working with boreal forests here, where seeds, roots, and mushrooms could resonate with food and foraging practices of tropical and temperate forests in Mexico. As we know, mainstream Finnish ideas about the forests depict birch, pine, and spruce as *the* native species. A massive logging industry has made them prevalent and iconic in the cultural imagination, when there are many more less-known native trees. In fact, Carmen’s early exploration of the literature (the Kalevala, where it is mentioned as “the tree of life”) quickly pointed at oaks as a very important species in the ecosystem. The oak was key in the expansion of firm land over the wetlands as the bedrock emerged in the last 10.000 years; it was present in middle and southwest Finland after the Ice Age, when the weather got warmer, and has persisted in the south since. Oaks are also vividly present in traditional songs and they were indeed once a staple local food. But searching for local information about them, Carmen and Martina discovered apparently oak had been phased out after Swedish colonization, which used its wood to build ships. Even people working on sustainability today were quick to point out that oak acorns didn’t have any nutritional value. But they do have it.

This immediately echoed with the history of corn in Mexico —that Martina researched back in 2020. Corn is deeply rooted in Mesoamerican worldviews. However, corn was made the cause for the “ignorance” and “primitiveness” of indigenous peoples by the nation

state and was pushed away to usher in European wheat. In 1950, a report from the Secretary of Public Health and Welfare in Mexico stated the impossibility of being a superior people if the population fed on proteins that were inadequate even for beasts, referring to corn and beans. The document spoke of the need to introduce animal food at all costs. Milk was designated as the best option, “rational and scientific”, and the subsequent forest clearing for cattle was brutal: in Veracruz and Tabasco a logging of 70% of the territory is estimated. The modern public discourse discredited corn while the meat and dairy industry aggressively expanded on the land. It is today well known how profitable and largely unsustainable this industry is, the massive deforestation and pollution it has caused in many latitudes, and how it lobbied public health policy from the 1940 onwards in several countries, supported in emergent “nutrition science” to attach its products to ideas of superior health and prosperity. Finland is not an exception.

Food is how we arrive to issues

As we went back and forth, North to South, touching upon learnings from previous residences the colectivo has been doing in Scotland, Korea, Switzerland, the resonance was striking. So I started asking about their methods. How do you work locally with these systemic issues?

In Mexico, the colectivo works with varied local territories and communities, from the most urban center near el Zocalo, where their kitchen/studio operates, to wild and native forests of Mexico City and in Veracruz region, where they grow the food. Their practice engages directly with the land and the women close to the land involved in traditional agriculture, the milpa, as well as with the complex social dynamics and cultural traditions of a country with deep colonial structures.

The *milpa is* an orchard technology present all the way from Oaxaca, Mexico, to Central America. At its core, the milpa is a knowledge about species interactions on the soil, by which sustainable and pest safe plantation is possible by interlocking plants in particular ways: corn, pumpkin and beans, along chiles and herbs. You can think of it as ancient Mayan permaculture.

The persistence of the milpa is particularly interesting in Milpa Alta, a unique ecosystem in the mountainous area of Mexico City that was never colonized and was declared indigenous reserve by the Spaniard crown. This ensured Milpa Alta's rich native forests, communal traditional ownership by the Comuneros, and original agricultural uses would be respected long before the modern state and city institutions were established. It gave the area a special status, making it unalienable from the community: a land neither private nor public, existing outside the market and the Mexican state control. Despite that, over time

the area has been affected by many factors pushing against traditional practices. Its conservation status is today under significant threat by huge housing needs of the city and informal settlements of slums, which in turn prompt initiatives (so far unsuccessful) to gentrify the area.

Following a commission of Museo Carrillo Gil, for more than four years Carmen and Martina have been steadily in contact with the Comuneros, learning from the forest foragers of Milpa Alta about its mushrooms, seeds, roods, and herbs, visiting the milpas weekly, discovering the important work that goes into the soil, to plant nopales, to sow corn, mill it, and cook with it. Their artistic work has been a long process of building communication and trust with these communities through the activities organized around the politics of food, and a continued attempt to learn, help resurface, map up, and make visible the value of these practices to the larger society.

In these dialogues, gatherings and sharing practices of the land and the kitchen (both on site and the museum venues), the colectivo has found their artistic research methods. Political activism, lament singing, and dancing are tightly knit in this fabric.

Hearing them talk, I slowly come to grasp the full scope of the project as it reframes everyday gestures and actions within large cultural and ecological dynamics. In their work, food constitutes both a strikingly rich aesthetic domain of our experience and knowledge on this earth, our relational lives, and a massive archive of social and ecological interactions.

"El punto de la masa" ... The sweet spot

At the same time that the colectivo explores foraging and preparing local foods creatively with others —an aesthetic investigation in its own right— they put especial attention to understand and make visible the legacies of the elders, the women, the foragers and seed keepers, and are in the process of building an archive of practices, recipes and knowledge of the territory that is closely intertwined with sustainable ways of life.

I am curious about how this knowledge is harvested and then reproduced, and the societal impact that their artistic and communal practice has. But even here the western notion of knowledge we carry on seems to get in the way… Beyond formalizing the oral information as a written collection of narratives, Martina explains, the practice revolves around cooking itself as an embodied shared technology. Cooking *is* the research methodology with others:

> Because then you can start to understand that the knowledge is not only spoken or written, it's also a knowledge from the body. In Mexico we work a lot with milled corn dough. Before you make a tortilla, you have to knead it. And when I started learning this, I was close to Doña Mercedes [the eldest member of the collective] and after a while I asked her: “Is it ready?” And she said “I don't know, you have to touch it.” “But how can I know what it is supposed to feel like?” So she told me, “Okay, you have to find *el punto de la masa* [the sweet spot of the dough]. So I was kneading and she was touching, touching, touching. Until she said “Now it's ready.” But then she was like: “Okay, now keep on kneading it.” [!!!] Because you have to see also how it feels when you knead too much, when you overdo it.
> It was being next to her what allowed me to learn. So this is a very very fragile knowledge, because you can read all the books you want explaining what is "el punto de la masa” but if you don’t know how to put the body in the dough, you will never know. The only way I can give this knowledge to someone else is through the shared experience.

In this process, the colectivo has found what is at stake in this unusual territory, starting by the dramatically different ways of regarding the land, food production, and food sovereignty: the ideas of progress and management of natural resources that city dwellers carry from the west (ourselves included), and the hands-on, embodied ways of thinking and working in the territory and its species by the Comuneros and other rural communities.

Martina tells me about her own process of coming to terms with the education she received, and the feeling of being at a loss in front of the environmental catastrophe and the food security crises large societies are facing today. She did her studies in economics in a fairly neoliberal school, where academics kept talking about the successful Chilean model. But right as these ideas were studied, in 2019, the October social upheaval against inequality exploded, and with it, the state crackdown of dissent. Martina remembers how empty of meaning the discussions of GDP and other economic indicators felt while the same state was shooting students in their faces, the alarming number of young people losing their sight because of this. “We are going to be done with this earth or this planet before we actually understand that our indicators are not showing us anything!”, she thought.

At the same time, Carmen was organizing workshops with local women around collaborative practices and food, and as Martina joined them very soon this revealed to be the right context for the questions she was interested in:

I don't care about just writing all this in a book or having all this narrative on a paper. My question was: how can we also, through this knowledge, find different ways of doing things, of thinking systems, of engaging in action that actually help for the common good?

Listening to the narratives of women and farmers close to the land, which show us the degeneration of the land but also its resilience, she began to see how several relevant indicators in fact emerged from the archive of food practices themselves: territorial degradation, autonomous systems, relational dynamics, language and territory.

And in the field of arts Martina and Carmen found it was possible to both understand these complex dynamics and make this a transformative practice. Art gave them the freedom to engage with people and the land, and keep untangling the systemic strings. And last but not least, art made it possible to directly support these communities by making their labor socially visible and recognised.

Re-enchanting the world: embodied, unwavering resistance

Talking about oak acorns, extensive agriculture, and the traces of food sovereignty that they have found in Finland during the residence interviewing foragers and small local farmers, we go back to discussing the frailty and importance of ancestral knowledge. When I ask what they have discovered in this residence that seems surprising to them, Martina immediately says: “The realization that colonization is not simply a North-South matter, and that it is not something from the past.”

We discuss the many signs of extinguishing ancestral practices everywhere, not just in the global South. The colectivo mentions the Sápmi, of course, but also many small local farmers and how hard their work is, flooded as they are with state regulations to survive and keep their ecological practices. Most regulations are based on sanitary safety concerns, of course, but they also impose industrial standards that require infrastructures, finances, and scales that exclude artisanal local producers and dismiss the value and existence of local sustainable practices. A sustainable farm has to sell all the milk produced at whatever prices it is bought by large industries, instead of, for example, making local cheese with the surplus, because having a cheese business in the same land holding cattle is illegal.

Unsurprisingly, while being a major milk producer, Finland's artisan cheese has vanished. And this is just one example of many. There are no traditional seed keepers that would gather and relay the knowledge of the seeds to communities. Seeds are a commodity to be purchased from certified corporations following strict biomanagement procedures by the Finnish Food Authority.

On the opposite pole of this division —the defense of non-hegemonic community knowledge— I ask about the local response of Milpa Alta to the state attempts of gentrification and privatization of the land. They tell me how the indigenous resistance has consisted essentially in cultivation itself, and reforestation with native species. In a wise and tenacious activism, the community puts the body in the land, ensuring local people can eat from the crops. Comuneros are persuaded this is the best way to keep developers and politicians off of it: a land that is not idle will not be taken away.

Carmen and Martina cannot but highlight and celebrate the strength of this collective force inhabiting the land and protecting the ancestral passing of knowledge. They offer their artistic work as a contribution to this common pot. In a way, once we have discussed all the things that seem upside down in modern technocratic control and instrumental, extractivist ideas of progress, we are left with one certainty: recovering systemic thinking and embodied awareness of our connection with the territory can only be done by investing in its resurgence and celebrating it.

These may seem very small actions, yet it is not the scale but the quality and the iteration of the actions that matters in the long run. Because these actions open horizons and build back trust across the colonial divide itself. They invert the values where the communal and rural knowledge is dubbed ignorance and the fragmentation of modern urban education is elevated as the only rational choice. It is us who have to re-educate ourselves.

An important part of mending these fractures is what Carmen and Martina call, after Silvia Federici, “re-enchanting life”, which entails making felt and making visible the subtle interactions and interdependence between communities and species, that will eventually enable society as a whole to make coexistence and livelihoods ecologically sustainable.

For the people putting the body in the land, the very soil, the milpa, the forest, is like a temple. The sacred is not a transcendental reality, beyond our material world. It is *immanent* to it, to the labor of our hands and our shared existence. This is how, Carmen and Martina tell me, you can think of the orchards in Milpa Alta as altars themselves: places where we offer our energy and our hopes to the motherland, and get food, our nurture, our survival, in return. This is where our ancestors made their offerings, and they sang as they sowed the land, as they foraged, as they made the tortillas or the bread. Singers were part of life —here in Finland and still today in Mexico, at the milpa— to mark and give good auspice to beautiful, hard, decisive moments of transformation.

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