



2013

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Recommended Citation

Wynne, Lauren, "Transformations in Body and Cuisine in Rural Yucatan, Mexico" (2013). *Anthropology and Sociology Faculty Publications*. 2.
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Transformations in Body and Cuisine in Rural Yucatán, Mexico

Lauren Wynne

Many twentieth-century ethnographic accounts of the rural Yucatec Maya analyze the accrual of culinary knowledge as a crucial part of the process of socialization, by which children become adults (e.g., Gaskins 2003; Greene 2002). Indeed, in the rural town of Juubche, fairly predictable culinary milestones continue to mark the lives of girls and women. Some young women, however, are using their access to new foods and related knowledge to challenge both local hierarchies of expertise and ideologies of racial difference. For many young women in Juubche, there is a link between consuming new foods and identifying oneself with larger Yucatecan and Mexican cultures. Yet, rather than disavowing their rural Yucatec Maya community, these women are establishing themselves as versatile and respected members of that community. Part of this process entails identifying oneself as someone who can manage new foods and successfully integrate them into the everyday rhythms of local life. In doing so, these women render themselves local culinary experts and expand the possibilities of alimentary pleasure for themselves and for their community. They are also reshaping a cosmology already in flux as they and these new foods complicate understandings of the body and the universe.

The conditions under which these young women live are the product of a century of governmental efforts to economically and culturally integrate the peninsula into the Mexican nation-state, yet these conditions also reflect centuries of ties with neighboring islands and an ecosystem more similar to that of those islands than to that of central Mexico. Though Yucatan's staple crops for centuries—corn, beans, and squash—are roughly the same as those in central Mexico and other parts of Mesoamerica, the local cuisine holds other daily foodstuffs in common with its Caribbean neighbors: habañero chilies, sour oranges, and sugarcane, among others. During the colonial period and even after Independence in 1821, the peninsula's remote location and powerful local elite shaped a strong regional culture that reflected its cultural and economic ties—and a shared history of slavery—with Caribbean islands and the southeastern United States (Joseph 1986; Torres-Saillant 2006: 20).

Today, the region shares an economic reliance on tourism with many of its Caribbean neighbors. Juubche's proximity to the large urban and tourist centers of Cancun and Playa del Carmen has changed the patterns of everyday life since the development of regional tourism in the 1970s. Though wage labor is not a new phenomenon, only during the last few decades has it begun to fully replace farming for many families.¹ The rise of tourism on the Peninsula largely coincided with a number of other factors that have shaped the ongoing decline of work in the *kool* (cornfield).² Prior to this, and despite a long history of outside intervention and engagement, agricultural practice and its attendant religious beliefs reproduced shared logics and values for the region's Maya population since the Conquest. The preparation and consumption of staple crops such as corn were central to the cycle through which Maya communities sustained themselves and their spiritual worlds. A gendered division of labor ordered the domestic landscape and produced largely self-sufficient households in which men produced and women processed food. Though never static, everyday and ritual consumption patterns generated community cohesion and maintained human and spiritual hierarchies. Beliefs, such as those embedded in the hot-cold syndrome, root individual bodies and their imperative for balance within a larger social order that seeks to also maintain balance within the multiple cycles—seasons, life spans—that characterize the existences of living beings, including supernatural forces (Villa Rojas 1981, 1983).

Located in the eastern part of the state of Yucatán, the town of Juubche has a population of around 2,600, almost all of whom are native speakers of Yucatec Maya. Most men now commute weekly to the Caribbean coast for work in construction or service industries. Some continue to farm full-time and others part-time, either seasonally when the crops demand labor, or when jobs in the cities wane, as during the global financial crisis that began in 2008. A small number of men live full-time in town but commute to work at a nearby archeological site or in service-industry jobs in Valladolid. Other men, though still a minority, supplement or opt out of agricultural labor to tend cattle in neighboring ranches.

Women's labor is based largely in the home; very few migrate for work, and when they do it tends to be only until they marry. The bulk of women's time is spent preparing food, cleaning the home and clothing, and caring for young children. Several women sell prepared foods and snacks to students at the local schools, and a small number—all unmarried and relatively young—commute daily or weekly to factory jobs in or near Valladolid. Many women also embroider *ipils* (a type of women's dress popular in the region), weave hammocks, and sew clothing to sell locally or in regional tourist markets. Depending upon the volume they produce and whether or not they sell directly to consumers, the degree to which this sort of labor contributes to household income varies tremendously. Additionally, most women have gardens in which they grow produce such as habañero chilies and cilantro for their own use and for sale, and men and women sometimes sell excess fruit from trees surrounding their homes. The sale of these foodstuffs tends to make up a small portion of household income. Women usually manage any money they earn, and in many families, women also manage the earnings of their male partners.

Contemporary Cuisine and Culinary Education

Due to the fact that farming is no longer a universal among men and that it often fails to meet the food needs of many families, most residents now buy staple foods such as corn, beans, and squash from neighbors with a surplus or from a store in town or in the nearby city of Valladolid.³ Residents supplement these staples with store-bought goods such as sugar, instant coffee, and crackers, and most also buy rolls and sweet breads from itinerant bakers. Chicken, beef, and pork are consumed at most a few times a week and are almost always freshly slaughtered, either within the household or by fellow residents. When wage labor jobs are few and far between, many more men hunt for local game such as deer, agouti, peccary, and gophers. Eggs, often from residents' own hens or neighbors' hens, are a more common part of the everyday diet and often make their way to the table every other day. Soft drinks have been a regular part of most residents' diets since the construction of major roads in the 1980s. The roads also allowed for the transport of mass-produced alcohol, particularly beer, into Juubche, and these beverages now fuel the weekend binges in which some local men indulge.⁴

Despite changes in the origins of many staple foods, the gendered division of food labor has not radically changed in recent decades. Although men continue to prepare certain ceremonial foods, women are still responsible for daily cooking. The processes by which girls and young women learn to do this work are similar to the culinary initiations of earlier generations. As school-age children, girls are often sent out to have corn ground at one of the local corn mills. All of my informants, who ranged in age from eighteen to eighty-six, learned to *pak'ach* (prepare tortillas) between the ages of eight and fourteen. Some women learned on their own out of necessity after a mother fell ill or passed way. One woman remembered: "My mother's head was hurting . . . Who made my father's serving? Me! With a spoon! With a knife! . . . I learned on my own like that."

More frequently, girls learned through observation and then by joining older girls and women at the table, subjecting their tortilla-making techniques and final products to critique. This learning process is often a slow one. Not all women—especially younger ones—are experts in tortilla making. In fact, girls are rarely those manning the fire; they tend to play a supporting role, patting out tortillas while an older female relative judges "cooked-ness" on the *xamach* (griddle). In some cases, girls who marry particularly young—at fifteen or sixteen—may have not yet perfected their tortilla-making skills. Still, even in those families for whom hand-patted tortillas are not the norm, tortilla making is required female knowledge, understood as crucial to the complementary gender roles that have organized household production for centuries (Landa [1566]1941; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934).

Learning to prepare savory dishes, which are known as *ki' waaj*, is an even lengthier process. Many girls are too busy patting tortillas, running errands, or attending to younger siblings to study the more in-depth food preparation usually undertaken by their mothers. They may observe and even participate in chopping vegetables and

herbs, juicing oranges and limes, and beating eggs. Those activities that require more skill and are thus more highly valued—for example, cutting meat, judging cookedness, and seasoning dishes—are generally left to the older women in the household. Preparing more basic everyday dishes like boiled black beans, scrambled eggs, and sautéed squash are learned through trial and error or casual observation, rather than direct instruction. One woman recounted to me how she learned to make *ki' waaj* by beginning its preparation and having her mother or mother-in-law taste it and make suggestions throughout the process: “Put a little salt.” Many of my young female informants (those in their twenties and younger, married and unmarried) profess little ability to cook well. As in the past, they largely rely on the culinary skills of female elders in their extended household and typically share kitchens with in-laws until they and their husbands have the funds to build separate homes. Mothers-in-law are often feared culinary critics; it is perhaps for this reason and the demands of raising small children that many younger women choose to eat meals cooked by their mothers-in-law.

When it comes to meat, highly seasonal dishes, or special-occasion foods, older women are the authority. Younger and middle-aged women take care to invite female relatives in their fifties and older to supervise the preparation of these foods on a regular basis. These women determine when a dish is sufficiently salty, spicy, or sweet; they cut the best pieces of meat and stuff the sausage; and their criticisms, small and large, are accepted without argument. There even exists a more formal role for culinary supervision within the Catholic community: a *xk'oos* is a woman, usually in her forties or older, who is invited to oversee food preparation and distribution.⁵ Generally, the more important the event, the further outside of a woman's kin network she might go in order to procure a *xk'oos*. In exchange for the lending of her knowledge and skills at a wedding or saint's day affair, a *xk'oos* receives more food to bring home than would the average female guest who patted out some tortillas or cut onions.

The Nature of Culinary Knowledge and Practice

The acquisition of culinary knowledge in rural Yucatan has historically been a gradual process that accelerates with marriage and upholds established ties between knowledge and advanced age. Culinary authority is based upon the mastery of a large but discrete repertoire of established dishes. This emphasis on repetition and mastery is central to the process by which rural Yucatecan cuisine is produced and reproduced, and the highly standardized nature of the preparation of the new foods that I will discuss in this chapter is representative of the larger cuisine of rural Yucatan. In her study of one Yucatecan community, Kray (1997) writes, “Consensus is so highly valued that each prepared dish is considered to have one single recipe, and the best cook is the one who can master that recipe, rather than adding a unique,

creative, or experimental twist” (82). In Juubche, families may claim different styles of cooking, but there is general agreement about which women possess the most impressive culinary skills.

Adults may have some dislikes, but they usually enjoy the range of dishes prepared on a regular basis in the village.⁶ It is unacceptable not to eat at least a little at any social gathering, so adults tolerate all special-occasion dishes (though they may decline leftovers to take home). Most eaters develop finely tuned tastes that are largely in sync with the tastes of others; typically, eaters are in agreement as to whether a dish is too *ch'óoch'* (salty), *paj* (sour), *ch'ujuk* (sweet), or *páap* (spicy), among other taste categories. Children learn to identify these tastes by observing and mimicking the frequent commentaries of adults. While older women have the final say at special-occasion events, individuals of all ages, male or female, may issue criticisms or compliments. These actions rarely go unnoticed by the cook. In one instance, I observed collective criticisms of one of the community's most revered dishes. During a meal of *relleno negro* (pork or turkey in a blackened chili sauce, served during the annual fiesta and other important events), I heard first the quiet whispers of “hach páap [very spicy]” by younger and middle-aged women and then the more confident, louder “hach páap” declarations by female elders. The faces of the hostess and her mother looked stricken. In situations like this one, individual criticisms or compliments often develop into discussions on the (mis)use of ingredients or cooking techniques: Were the chilies too spicy? Was the spice mixture too coarsely ground?

Such commentaries are rarely attributed to personal tastes. Although criticisms may be challenged, they are generally trusted and, if noted by other eaters, effectively confirmed. This emphasis on standardization is evidenced by the use of the very terms for tastes. *Ch'óoch'* signifies “salty,” but not, as the English word implies, “too salty.” Rather, *ch'óoch'* signifies “perfectly salty”; the response to a question about whether one's food is *ch'óoch'* is often *tun p'iis* (to measure) or *tiibil* (proportionate). *Hach ch'óoch'* signifies “too salty,” and *ma' ch'óoch'i'* literally translates to “not salty,” though the implication is really “not salty enough.” Other taste words function similarly: for example, *páap*. My own preference for spicy-hot foods initially led me to proclaim, with pleasure, several dishes *hach páap*. The looks of concern on cooks' faces made it evident to me that *hach páap* is not preferable and implicates a cook in using too much chili. Some women are known to produce *ki' waaj* that is *ma' ch'óoch'i'*, which is seen not as a reflection of personal taste but rather as a mark of inferior cooking skills.

Novel Foods: Recent Additions to the Culinary Landscape

The content of what most Juubche residents eat on a daily basis is similar to that consumed several generations ago: corn tortillas, beans, eggs, chicken, or, less

frequently, pork or beef, and a small but satisfying array of vegetables from cornfields or home gardens. According to residents, many of these staples are no longer produced locally, but the ways in which they are prepared are largely similar to earlier culinary practices described by my informants. Purchased snacks and drinks are crucial parts of the gastronomic landscape in this town—and they require unique sets of cultural knowledge to guide their purchase and consumption—but they do not demand preparation and, thus, no culinary expertise. The dishes in which this chapter is interested are occasionally served for everyday meals, though usually for the lighter dinner than the main meal of lunch. They are most often served for secular events such as birthdays or New Year’s Eve celebrations, which have been adopted from mainstream Mexican culture in recent decades. Indeed, none of these dishes, which I will soon introduce, are ever paired with corn tortillas, a staple and nonnegotiable part of the midday meal; thus these new foods do not qualify as *hanal*. *Hanal*, though loosely translated as “food,” really refers to a meal of *ki’ waaj* with tortillas. The new foods are not what I term “well-established”; rather, these new dishes have entered into the local diet only in the last two decades, beginning with the construction of roads into town, followed by the arrival of electricity and television to most households, all of this coinciding with the development of regional tourism. Well-established foods, on the other hand, have been consumed consistently over the lifetimes of all of my informants, the oldest of whom was born in the early 1920s.

AUQ 1 Among the most prominent of these new foods are three dishes, and I’ll focus on them here. The first is *sandwich*, or “sandwich” in English. Yet the sandwich of Juubche is not like the sandwiches of the United States. There is no vast array of ingredients from which to choose, nor an appreciation for creative and original combinations. The Juubche sandwich is highly standardized: white Bimbo bread (Mexico’s equivalent of Wonder Bread), a thin spread of mayonnaise, shredded chicken, sliced tomato, and a few pieces of canned, pickled jalapeño. For parties, sandwiches are often wrapped in white paper napkins to keep them clean and to make for easy distribution. The second dish is *sopa fría*. Although it translates to “cold soup,” it refers in Juubche only to a pasta salad with canned pineapple chunks, bits of processed ham, canned peas, and mayonnaise. In Juubche, *sopa fría* is always served with soda crackers for scooping. The third dish is called *ensalada*, “salad” in English, but this recipe refers to a very specific version of potato salad, with boiled carrots, canned peas, mayonnaise, and maybe a splash of the vinegar from a can of pickled jalapeños. Like *sopa fría*, it is always served with soda crackers for scooping. Both *sopa fría* and *ensalada* are seasoned with salt and pepper, and are usually dished out onto small, disposable serving plates at various occasions.

In content, these dishes bear little resemblance to well-established local foods. The ingredients are almost all purchased and produced outside of the community, and few are used in everyday cooking. Only those few families with refrigerators can store the leftover ingredients for more than a day. And, since these dishes are not eaten with tortillas, women do not need to sit in front of the fire before and during

a meal, nor do these dishes need to be served at a particular temperature. Practically speaking, then, these foods leave women free to socialize or attend to other hostessing duties. Because servings are generally contained—wrapped as individual portions or served as a scoop on a small plate—the thoughtful judgments regarding who gets what and how much are largely unnecessary.⁷ Furthermore, these foods do not require a table on which to consume them; guests can easily eat them in a chair with a plate or, in the case of sandwich, just in their hands. Instead of being called to eat at a limited number of tables—a hierarchy that generally prioritizes men and any esteemed guests—guests are served in a simpler and more democratic fashion: the hostess(es) and helpers distribute food by moving around the space, handing food to each and every individual in an order determined only by who is sitting or standing closest.

Once distributed, these dishes are often treated differently than well-established foods. A number of older people told me that they find these foods to be *ma' ki'* (not tasty), especially *sopa fría*. As such, and in light of the fact that these foods are often distributed at evening festivities (usually around most residents' bedtimes), some attendees choose not to eat their helpings at the event. As with established foods, however, guests must accept a first serving, so they often choose to bring the food home with them. *Ki' waaj* is exchanged between families on an often-daily basis in Juubche, and it is sent home with guests at many affairs. It is considered poor form to throw any gifted *ki' waaj* away.⁸ *Sopa fría*, *ensalada*, and sandwich are a different matter. For most residents, these foods are acceptable to give to dogs, cats, or chickens as soon as they return from an event. While it would still not be preferable for one's host to see such behavior, it is not considered *k'eban* (sinful), as would be the tossing of *ki' waaj*.

With regard to taste, these foods differ greatly from the fare that most residents consume on a daily basis. While the inclusion of canned, pickled jalapeños adds heat to sandwich, and their juices sometimes enliven *ensalada*, the three dishes are bland. Well-established dishes are simply prepared but marked by generous additions of lard, pickled or sautéed onions, spice marinades, or citrus juices. Blander foods are reserved for breakfast and light dinners, in the form of French bread and store-bought crackers, or for those with illness-related food restrictions. Texturally as well, sandwich, *sopa fría*, and *ensalada* stray from the usual preferences. Variations on the *torta*, a type of sandwich common throughout Mexico, are rarely prepared at home by Juubche residents, though many residents purchase and consume them while attending school or working outside of town. Unlike sandwich, the *torta* features a serving of meat on a crusty, large roll, often with some avocado, onion, chili salsa, or other garnish.⁹ A *torta* is texturally complex and less *suave* (smooth) than sandwich. *Sopa fría* and *ensalada* are served chilled or at room temperature, and have a creamy consistency. Puréed foods, such as *tsabij bu'ul* (literally, “fried beans,” but more like soupy refried beans) and *tsabij p'aak* (literally, “fried tomato,” but more of a spicy tomato sauce), are commonly consumed, but they are served warm and lack the

creaminess of potatoes or pasta coated in mayonnaise. In fact, creaminess is entirely uncharacteristic of well-established foods, in which the inclusion of mayonnaise, milk, cheese, and other dairy products is rare.

Above all, what these three dishes have in common is near-absolute uniformity in their composition, much like that seen in more established foods. Not once have I witnessed anyone suggest an addition or variation to these foods. When older women question whether a particular item—pickled onions or shredded cabbage, for example—was included in sandwiches, younger women promptly remind them of the correct ingredients. In fact, younger women are the authorities on these foods; as one woman in her seventies announced while eating a sandwich at a birthday party, “The children really know how to make these things.” In nuclear families without young women, a niece may be invited over to assist with the preparation of these foods, nearly taking on the role of the *xk’oos* despite her youth. These women remind their older counterparts of the exact ingredients, the best places to purchase them, and the steps by which the dishes should be created. During the actual preparation, they oversee the assembly of sandwiches and the mixing of *ensalada* and *sopa fría*. They usually have the final say in how much salt and pepper must be added, and how many soda crackers should be placed with each serving. When I wondered out loud to an older woman about the safety of eating unrefrigerated mayonnaise the next day (thus revealing one of my own cultural anxieties about food), she quickly relayed the question to her much younger sister, who promptly assured her of its safety. Indeed, new foods require a distinct knowledge of how *ch’óoch’* or how *páap* they are, and older women rarely hold that knowledge in preparation or in taste (nor for that matter do older men). Indeed, one noticeable difference is that while new foods are being consumed, one rarely hears any commentary on the taste.

Novel Innovations

Of course, cuisine in rural Yucatan is and always has been dynamic, an amalgamation determined by availability, necessity, force, and trend. In Juubche, government-initiated cultural missions during the mid-twentieth century sent *promotoras* (outreach workers) to instruct women in the preparation of dishes not locally consumed. Some women embraced these recipes, many of which used locally produced ingredients, more than others. Doña Paola, a respected culinary authority in the community, has not worked as a *xk’oos* since converting to a Jehovah’s Witness a dozen years ago. However, she often prepares foods that require specialized knowledge, such as tortilla-like breads made from corn dough, sweet potato, and vanilla, or a savory version made from corn dough and *chaya*, a leafy green. Doña Paola was not alone in learning about these foods from a *promotora* a half-century ago, but she has had the time and interest to continue cooking them.

A few women learned to create new dishes during time spent outside of the village. Female migration from Juubche was not common during the twentieth century,

but some girls were sent to work as domestic servants in Merida or Valladolid. Prior to the construction of a secondary school in town in the 1990s, poor families often struggled to feed older girls who remained unmarried and at home. Primary school teachers who developed relationships with local families would sometimes arrange domestic work for these girls. Some were instructed to prepare new foods while doing this domestic labor, while others simply observed—and consumed—the foods prepared by the household cook. Cristina, who worked as a nanny to a Valladolid family in the early 1990s, remembered, “There was a cook, too. I watched how she cooked. Because I liked cooking, I would get close and see how she made it. That’s how I learned.” However, she noted that she doesn’t often cook these meals at home: “Foods like that require money.”

In other cases, men acted as culinary conduits; having traveled to work in Cancun or other parts of the peninsula, they were often party to unfamiliar culinary practices. Don Martín, a highly inquisitive man, remembered visiting an acquaintance in the Cancun home where she worked as a domestic servant. She offered him a *refresco* (soft drink). Expecting Coca-Cola, he agreed, but she handed him a green drink. He found it tasty and inquired as to its contents. His friend told him that it was made from aloe vera juice. Upon his return home, he prepared it for his wife and children. Unimpressed by its taste, Don Martín’s wife, however, was not interested in integrating the beverage into her culinary repertoire.

If residents have always been interested in trying new foods, what is new about the acquisition of culinary expertise by young women today? Despite a lack of roads and electricity until the 1980s, Juubche’s residents had contact with their local schoolteachers, most of whom came from other parts of the peninsula; residents traveled to fairs and on religious pilgrimages; and men migrated to work in *chicle* camps or on archaeological excavations. During this time, women of many ages adopted new food practices, and many of these foods were easily integrated into, at the very least, dinner and secular, festive menus. Urban street foods, such as *panuchos* (thick, fried tortillas stuffed with beans and topped with meat and vegetable garnishes), used common ingredients found in cornfields and home gardens. Women did not need much cash, nor did they need to venture out of town to shop for ingredients. These foods carried with them a faint air of urban savviness, but they were also rooted in local agriculture and tastes. Other novelties, such as the aloe vera soft drink mentioned, became mere fodder for humorous anecdotes, perhaps due to the labor of preparation or to a wife’s lack of interest.

Today, a much broader range of media influences the integration of new foods. Many women watch *Al sabor del chef*, a cooking show that airs on network television; the ingredients are not always familiar, but the recipes often pique interests, for good or bad. One woman told me that, while she did watch the show, she thought many of the dishes appeared *ma’ ki’*. In one case, Elena, a young woman known for being particularly skilled in preparing new foods, explained to me that she had one cookbook, and that she used it to prepare new foods such as fajitas and hot cakes for her husband and children. Importantly, her husband Jose, a socially mobile young

man, was regularly exposed to new foods at his job in Playa del Carmen. While there, he often traveled and dined with his middle-class boss, and both Jose and Elena became interested in eating such foods at home.

Indeed, one important characteristic of the young women who act as authorities on sandwich, *sopa fría*, and *ensalada* is their exposure to regional and national culinary practices. In some senses, these resident experts are a diverse group: several are Catholic and several are Jehovah's Witnesses; a few are married, a few unmarried, and one divorced; and they participate in a range of labor activities in addition to regular housework. However, all exercise control over the money they or their husbands earn. Thanks to their own work or that of their husbands, they are at least slightly wealthier than most women their age. They have access to cars owned by their husbands or fathers, and they also own and regularly use appliances like refrigerators and stoves. For these reasons, they can easily purchase food products from outside of Juubche, as well as store and prepare those foods in ways that are not accessible to many of their fellow-residents.¹⁰ For women with access to cars, going on day trips to nearby cities or touristic sites may also expose them to new foods. Within families in which husbands have relatively well-paying jobs (for example, as taxi drivers or waiters), the husbands themselves may have access to more than the basic fare consumed by construction workers while working on the coast. They may discover foods that they enjoy, carefully note their preparation, and suggest the dishes to their wives upon their return home. In contrast, lower-paid construction workers often rely on what they find to be less-tasty versions of the simple foods consumed at home, stocking up on cooked chicken and machine-made tortillas at Wal-Mart or a budget eatery.

However, the differences between these women and others are not just a matter of material resources. Although they have varying levels of education, they strike both me and other residents as notably intelligent and ambitious. As an older woman remarked of one of these younger women, "She learns things quickly." Another woman in her mid-twenties, who had learned new dishes from a sister-in-law from Merida, told me that her head was "smooth" and that, whatever she saw her sister-in-law make, she learned to make for herself. All of these women are highly attentive to the culinary behaviors of others—and not only those of their kin and neighbors but also of visiting tourists, and of middle- and upper-class residents of nearby cities. These women are keenly aware of the relationship between food and class on the peninsula but, rightly so, they see the boundaries between consumption practices, ethnicity, and wealth as flexible. The appeal of these new foods is not merely a product of the status one assumes through their consumption but is most certainly connected to the respect one receives as a culinary expert within this relatively small community. In fact, it is the ability to be flexible about food—to speak knowledgeably about new foods and to express a wide range of tastes—that lends these women respect and admiration. They continue to eat well-established foods and are as likely as anyone else to invite a *xk'oos* to help prepare *relleno negro* for a special occasion.

Yet these women have a unique relationship with a category of foods that comprises local culinary luxuries, and this strips their food practices of a locally perceived link to poverty. Two young women may both eat black beans and tortillas several days a week, but the ability of one to talk knowledgeably about and skillfully prepare, say, *ensalada*, distinguishes her from the other.

Not of the Poor, nor of the Cornfield

The categorization of these new foods as luxurious is based on particular sociocultural understandings and bodily experiences of their material qualities, as well as on deep-rooted ideas of class and racial difference. These foods are, again, rarely everyday foods. They are, perhaps, not entirely food to begin with, at least not the food of poor farmers. Older residents often explicitly mark simple, well-established staples like beans and eggs as *u hanalil otsil* (food of the poor). What is perhaps most appealing about sandwich, *sopa fría*, and *ensalada* to all is their utter frivolity. These foods are not, by local standards, the foods of poor people, nor are they valued for health or economy. The consumption of them is pleasurable to most residents not only because of the foods' tastes—or, in fact, as I point out earlier, in spite of—but because of the luxuriousness that these foods speak.

These foods are often talked about as being *fino* (fine) or smooth. These qualities are considered those required for the bodies of *ts'uulo'ob*—wealthy, ostensibly white, non-Maya speakers—whose food does not need to fuel the hard labor of planting and sowing crops.¹¹ These new foods are not understood to be particularly nutritious; they are never, for example, classified as *t'saak* (medicine), as some local foods are. However, they are thought to be easy on the stomach. For that reason, some socially mobile women believe them to be particularly good for children, having adopted the idea that children have distinct food needs. Older people, on the other hand, often complain that these new foods do not fill them up, that they “*mu nak'tal yetel* [do not get full with them].”

The new foods are largely un-integrated into the hot-cold syndrome that organizes the logic of much of everyday eating. The hot-cold syndrome, common throughout much of Latin America, classifies foods as either “hot” or “cold,” sometimes based on temperature but often not (Chevalier and Sánchez Bain 2003; Foster 1994).¹² As Callahan notes (2005: 373), the system in Yucatan has come increasingly to refer to thermal temperature, though in Juubche many metaphorical classifications persist.¹³ In general, balance and imbalance are produced through combinations of “heat” and “cold” found in bodies and their parts, as well as in food, drink, and natural elements; produced by activities and phases of life; and caused by emotions such as anger. For this reason, individuals must exercise great care in their contact with food. The greatest concerns in Juubche are exposure to “cold” foods and forces, such as wind and rain, while one's *óol* (center of consciousness) is “hot.”¹⁴ Such exposure can

cause illnesses, infertility, and death. Don Antonio, a farmer in his sixties, explained to me, “Why do we care for ourselves like this? We’re scared!” When older people express concern about eating new foods like *sopa fría* and sandwich when their *óol* is “hot,” younger people assure them that these foods are not “cold.” Assurances from younger women that new foods like *ensalada* and *sopa fría* do not hold any disruptive qualities put older people at ease with foods that would otherwise be unfamiliar and anxiety inducing. Yet, in not integrating these new foods into the hot-cold syndrome, younger women are also dismantling, or at least reshaping, a cosmology in which foodstuffs, like other natural resources, are part of larger cycles of life, death, and exchange.¹⁵ They are further marking these foods as distinct from those grown locally; without knowledge of how these new foods are produced, Juubche’s residents lack at least part of the understanding with which they would categorize them into the hot-cold syndrome.

Furthermore, that younger woman do feel confident preparing these foods and introducing them to others challenges local assumptions held by older people about racial types. Over the course of my fieldwork, I noticed differences in how younger and older people referred to themselves and their fellow townspeople. As I strolled down a quiet street one afternoon, a woman in her fifties beckoned to me from her doorway, where she sat sewing. By the time I reached her front gate, she was standing outside with a gaggle of relatives: an elderly man, a couple of younger women, and a few small children. After we exchanged pleasantries, the woman asked me how I had found my way to this town of *indios* (Indians). One of the younger women quickly corrected her: “Yucatecans. We are Yucatecans.” The common practice of locals to speak in the personal plural (the *-o’on* suffix in Yucatec Maya) reveals the use of a variety of terms. Those in their forties and older almost always use terms such as *mayero*, *indio*, or *otsil*, terms that connote indigeneity and poverty, while younger people refer to themselves as *Yucatecos* and, less frequently, as *Mexicanos*.¹⁶

Older people tend to pin dietary differences on these perceived racial distinctions, and many suggest that *ts’uulo’ob* are immune to the hot-cold imbalances to which they are vulnerable.¹⁷ For older women in particular, generally the least well-traveled among residents, the categories of *mayero* and *ts’uul* align with distinct culinary patterns, influenced by the contrast between local food practices and the consumption practices of *ts’uulo’ob* that they have observed on television. Older women are often surprised by the breastfeeding of *xunáano’ob* (feminine equivalent of *ts’uulo’ob*), as infant formula is understood to be finer than breastmilk. *Ts’uulo’ob* do not *uk’ul* (drink) in the morning; they *desayunar* (breakfast), and they are able to eat at that time such “cold” foods as papaya, to no ill effect. While Juubche residents of all ages believe that one can sometimes *suuktal* (grow accustomed) to different foods and environments, older informants frequently impress upon me their belief that the foods that they were accustomed to eating were uniquely suited for their bodies and lifestyles.

In contrast, younger women and men usually have more contact with urban Mexicans and foreigners, giving them less essentialist understandings of food consumption. The greater willingness of younger women to experiment with new foods also provides a concrete means of testing accepted theories of difference; as they serve their children hot cakes and sandwich to no adverse effects, they begin to question essentialist theories of food suitability. In challenging established ideas of racial difference, however, young people have actually contributed to the development of an alternate theory of bodily difference: younger generations, some elderly residents posit, are growing more like those of *ts'uulo'ob*. The changing lifestyles of the young, as well as selective evidence of phenotypical change, especially with regards to height and skin color, reinforce this theory for some older people. Doña Susana, a woman in her fifties, noted how her younger neighbor gave her children “cold” drinks with “hot” food in the cool evenings. Doña Susana explained that she wouldn't have dared do that with her children a few decades earlier, but then concluded that it didn't seem to do much harm to children today.

Conclusion

The repertoire of dishes that make up everyday cuisine in Juubche is the product of centuries of adaptation to topography and climate that is more Caribbean than “Mexican,” of roots in Mesoamerican cosmology, and of colonial policy and religious conversion. The adoption of dishes like sandwich, *sopa fría*, and *ensalada* by Juubche's residents is too the result of complex factors, made possible by a series of major economic and cultural shifts during the twentieth century, including the decline of agriculture, the development of tourism, and the expansion of mass media. The rapid absorption and dissemination of food-related knowledge and skills by young women are the products of sharp observations of the ways in which food is prepared and consumed on television and in urban areas. The skill-set young women demonstrate in preparing new foods embodies—for them and for their kin and neighbors—both a mastery of one culinary realm and a mastery of the art of middle-class living. They seek to broaden their food practices and knowledge as a mechanism for personal and social development.

The ways in which young women have embraced these foods have themselves been productive of social change in Juubche. There is not a systematic devaluation of established culinary knowledge in Juubche; rather the culinary culture itself is expanding, largely due to these young women. They are assuming positions of authority within a culinary culture that continues to value standardization over creativity. In this way, these women are recreating cultural emphases on consensus and collectivity, and maintaining some form of cohesion in the face of growing religious diversity and economic inequality in their community. At the same time, their knowledge of

these new foods and their access to resources complicate local and regional ideologies of race, class, and biology. Sandwich, *sopa fría*, and *ensalada* do not just require new methods of preparation and consumption but also new understandings of bodies and health. As long as these foods remain outside of the established hot–cold syndrome and the cosmology of which it is a part, they will continue to require that Juubche residents re-conceptualize the world in which they live.

For residents, there are few, if any, connections between these new foods and the hard human labor, sometimes-extreme weather, and often-fickle supernatural forces that have affected the production of food for generations. It is this radical difference that is, in fact, part of the appeal of sandwich, *sopa fría*, and *ensalada*. These young women's acquisition of new culinary skills and the dexterity and authority with which they exercise them bring a taste of, and for, culinary luxuries to Juubche, effectively broadening the realm of pleasure within the community. The case of these young women reminds us that food, as both objects and actors in human lives, holds the potential to challenge fixed and generalized notions of identity as much, if not more so, than it does to uphold them. Perhaps more importantly, this case demonstrates that food has the remarkable ability to shake a community's view of the world while preserving some of its core values: in Juubche, a respect for knowledge, a desire for cohesion, and a commitment to eating as well as possible.

Author Query

1. “The first is *sandwich*, or ‘sandwich’ in English”: I’m not clear on the distinction you’re trying to make here. Both terms are spelled the same. Perhaps add the pronunciation of *sandwich* to distinguish it from the English term?