

Stirring the Pot: *Calendario de Comida 1976*, Chicano Art as Food Activism

Abstract:

In the 1960s and '70s Chicano and Latino organizations around the country began advocating for more political and social empowerment to counter discrimination, oppression, and neglect. The Royal Chicano Art Force and La Galería de la Raza, art collectives formed to creatively instill pride, dignity, and respect in the Chicano community of northern California sustained and documented the Chicano movement, bridging community activism, art, advertisement, and social formation. Their most prominent screen print designs drew from Mexican heritage in their color and shape and advertised United Farm Worker events, social justice gatherings, health initiatives, etc. A calendar set, titled *Calendario de Comida 1976*, draws from Mexican pre-Columbian history, highlighting a decolonized reflection of food, health and culture. Each month has a unique approach to food history, from celebrating Mexican foods and Indigenous crops like corn, to exploring the reliance of poor people on food stamps. Drawing from Chicano Studies and Food Studies, these images demonstrate that food is political, cultural, healing, and empowering.

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In the catalog for the exhibition, *Printing the Revolution: The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now*, curator E. Carmen Ramos identifies that the revolutionary moment of the Chicano movement “signified an individual and societal paradigm shift, as citizens, residents, and entire communities demanded equality and justice” (2020: 23).ⁱ The artists that participated in the Chicano Movement, or el *Movimiento* rallied for broad-term social change for their community by creating “visually arresting works that catalyzed a Chicano public coming into awareness of itself” (2020: 24). It was in this moment, 1975, that the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF) and La Galería de la Raza (Galería), artist collectives in northern California, created a graphic calendar series titled *Calendario de Comida 1976*. The calendar celebrated their collective Chicano identity through art, and food that, in part, helped stage “critical debates about U.S history and identity” (Ramos 2020: 25). The calendar reflected and highlighted indigenous food knowledge, the colonial impact of food, and the reimagining of political and social justice of a shared food culture. This twelve-month calendar plus a cover, printed in 1975, features a unique approach to food history, from celebrating Mexican foods and Indigenous crops like corn, to exploring the poor’s reliance on food stamps.ⁱⁱ

The artists were familiar with a tradition of illustrated calendars that were created as giveaways from local stores and restaurants which commonly portray scenes of Mexican indigenous myths. Artist Juanishi Orosco recalls the use of calendars as sources for art and identity, “We took a step consciously in the seventies...to project...the true values that we have in our

community” (Diaz, 2017: 150). The calendar prints consist of three registers; a main image, a small section in the upper right-hand corner that features more imagery or a poem, and the monthly calendar box in bottom left, sometimes with additional imagery or phrases. A few of the prints include poems, often with word play that reflect the playful but pointed nature of the subject, often highlighting the bilingual and bicultural voices, culture, and reality (Diaz 2017). For the *Calendario*, they adopted this calendar format to explore Chicano foodways and history and often infused the Pre-Columbian stories and Aztec and Mayan imagery into the artwork and privileged ideas of tradition and identity.ⁱⁱⁱ This was a collaborative effort between the RCAF and the Galería which created this as a \$25 fund raiser for both groups to help sustain their community efforts.^{iv} The reliance and use of Pre-Columbian ideas was strategic, respecting knowledge of traditions past, about healthy foods drawn from pre-Columbian ideals, and acknowledging the role pre-Columbian traditions have played in the community and globally at large (Diaz 2017).

The calendar, created in 1975, was firmly bounded by the counterculture revolution and the good food movement which posed questions about alternative food histories and alternative food ways.^v Reforming the food system and “voting with your fork” reflected values and work of community activism.^{vi} Increased immigration from Mexico and Central America changed the social landscape of cities across the U.S. This period also saw the growth of Mexican food business and restaurants, fast food and high end, across the nation and globally.^{vii} This new way of approaching foodways also gave rise to the importance of native knowledge. This new social cultural and technological landscape informed and was reflected in how Chicano activists and the general public acknowledged and interacted with daily life.^{viii}

The Artists and El Movimiento

The Rebel Chicano Art Front (later The Royal Chicano Air Force) was created in 1969 by art professors José Montoya and Esteban Villa along with many other artists, activists, community organizers, poets, and teachers while at California State University, Sacramento. As artists and art students, they worked informally to support community events with creative endeavors. The group eventually came together under Joe Serna and Ricardo Favela in 1972 to form the Centro de Artistas Chicanos, an organization that provided much needed community space and support for after-school arts programs, a library and book store, community Breakfast for Niños, curandismo workshops, even an auto-body-repair training program. To supplement the meager city and private funds for the Centro, the artists organized art and gallery shows, art auctions, and sale of prints in the bookstore. Originally called the Rebel Chicano Art Front, the collective would sign the pieces as “RCAF,” often being confused with the Royal Canadian Air Force. Being a creative bunch, they changed their name from the Rebel Chicano Art Front to the Royal Chicano Air Force. They embraced this new identity/confusion, getting Army surplus clothing, and creating “ranks” of general or “creative mechanicos comsimcos”, or cosmic mechanics. They created a mythical origin story that states that they flew here from the mythical homeland of Aztlán in adobe airplanes. This playfulness broke down many social

barriers in the barrio and within the larger Sacramento community and helped them tackle serious subjects through their programs and art.

Like the Centro and RCAF, the Galería de la Raza was formed in 1970 by more than a dozen artists in San Francisco's Mission District as a community arts space. The Galería started as an independent entity like many other community institutions, founded to serve art and artists not included in mainstream institutions (Corodva 2017). An earlier organization, Casa Hispana, created in the 1960's was a Hispanic cultural center where many of the Galería artists got their start. The Galería was later funded by the Neighborhood Arts Program, with the goal of creating a space for arts education and arts activities. The Galería countered the segregation of mainstream organizations by opening a space for Latino artist to be exhibit their work (Corodva: 85). They created mural programs, residency programs, and Day of the Dead celebrations. The Galería became the artistic and spiritual hub of the Mexican American community. As recently as 2018, the Galería hosted an exhibit titled, *Comida es Medicina* which aimed at uplifting the knowledge, traditions, and practices of immigrant and indigenous members of our communities in relation to food, ancestral knowledge, and respect for Mother Earth.^{ix}

Both the RCAF and the Galería can be tied to a broader wave of political and social activism for communities of color in the 1960's and 70's. Community organizations around the country began advocating and organizing for more political and social empowerment as a counter to the discrimination, oppression, and neglect that many Latino communities experienced. The struggle of farm workers and the rise of the United Farm Workers was one of the most visible actions of the Movimiento. But many other factors also contributed such as the widening economic gaps, neglect in city services, discrimination, lack of representation in politics and art. The GI Bill sent many Chicanos to college, opening young eyes to new ways to fight injustice. Many young social reformers took advantage of funds from the War on Poverty programs to establish community service organizations and improve social services. The RCAF and the Galería and many others like it were formed to creatively instill pride, dignity, and respect for the Chicano community (Hillinger 1979). These groups built their own community spaces, arts spaces, and educational spaces to reach Latino communities in ways that prominent art and cultural centers did not.

Art became one of the fronts in the fight for community self-empowerment and advocacy during the Movimeinto. Art schools and colleges in California and New York organized artistic workshops to help combine art with social movements (Goldman 1984). The RCAF and Galería members also drew artistic and activist inspiration from a long tradition of printmaking in Mexico such as political and cultural artist José Posada in the 1890's and the Taller Grafica Popular in the 1930's (Goldman 1984). The reliance on silk screen poster art with a pop art aesthetic created a whole new movement and vocabulary of artistic forms, colors, and representations that drew from Mexican heritage but were also easy and quick to replicate (Diaz 2017; Goldman 1984). For Chicano activists, this mixing of Pre-Columbian, Mexican, American, European history was a strength to highlight, not suppress. They "privileged Pre-Columbian imagery and spiritual concepts...as a cultural foundation for a shared Chicano

identity.” (Diaz: 3) Posters in shop windows and the creation of murals made the streets the gallery space that advertised United Farm Worker events, social justice gatherings, health initiatives, etc. The artist pushed for a decolonization of Chicano thought by reimagining colonial histories through the imagery employed and where and how the images were put up (Diaz 2017). Transcending their present with the past, supporting people that work the land and centering on their community’s needs can be seen in their food art. The Chicano Civil rights movement succeeded and was sustained in part, by images like these.

The 1960’s and 70’s were a volatile time where the struggle of farmworkers and the fight for civil rights were tied up in ideas about identity and respect. The invisibility of Chicano representation extended to everyday life. Mexican traditions, arts, culture, and food were not seen as mainstream. The Pre-Columbian and mestizo symbolism used in these images were more than cultural affirmation, its use transformed it to a cultural reality (Diaz). The inclusion of land and sacred space, like a community bakery, or the role of women as tradition bearers, and the importance of corn as a spiritual and nourishing element can be seen in these images. The simple act of drawing food transformed history and culture to political and health struggle (Klein 2015). However, Chicano artists have often exploited the trope of women as cooks. For instance, the cover image (figure 1) show women as tradition bearers, those doing cooking and have the knowledge of plants and food. The Chicano movement and Chicano art are heavily criticized for the lack of representation of women in leadership roles, often seen as subservient to men and perpetuating stereotypes. Only two women are featured artist in this series, Lorenza Campusano de Camplís and Patricia Rodriguez. Despite the criticisms however, the RCAF and Centro de Artistas did have women organizers that initiated and organized community programs using food as an entry point. Lerma Barbosa ran the Breakfast for Niños program and spearheaded the Conferencia Femenil, 1974 which included a curandismo-medicinal plants workshops (Diaz: 158). Women also organized and ran the Fiesta de Maíz ceremony centered around women’s spiritual and bodily health and honoring the role of women in sustaining the community.

The images and poems that accompany the prints highlight a decolonized reflection of food, health and culture. As art historian Shana Klein claims, “Representations of food in American art and culture are neither innocent nor straight forward, but politically-charged pictures driven by ideologies that support or challenge an imperial agenda in North America.” (Klein 2015: vi). These images assert that food is political, cultural, healing, and empowering. In reflecting what decolonizing food as health and identity aspect, scholar Catrióna Rueda Esquibel argues “that vast systems of white supremacy and colonial regimes of power and knowledge have led to an erasure and devaluation of the contributions of indigenous people and cultures.”^x She argues, much like the Chicano activist and artist from the 1970’s argued, that we have to pay attention to cultural context of where our food comes from, who cultivates it, how its prepared, and how its consumed (Rueda Esquibel 2016).

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ⁱ To see more images and examples that relate to food activism please visit *Printing the Revolution: The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now*. <https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/chicano-graphics/online>

ⁱⁱ During the National Museum of American History’s annual *Food History Weekend 2020 Food Future: Striving for Justice* we explored how the pandemic has affected the food system and we include stories of essential workers that put food on our table, of food insecurity brought on by loss of income due to pandemic, and smaller scale alternative means of feeding ourselves and our communities. Although not available online anymore, as part of the program we included six of these calendar images. This article is a deeper exploration from that program. <https://foodhistoryweekend.si.edu/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Jeffery Pilcher has written about how Mexican national identity is constructed through foodways in the late 19th and early 20th century. He examines class, status, indigenous history, and politics through the lens of food and popular dishes. See *Que Vivan Los Tamales!: Food and Making of Mexican Identity*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1998 and *Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food*, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012.

^{iv} Both the RCAF and the Galaría produced calendars from about 1973 until 1977, some collaborative, and some independent. The 1975/76 series was the only one to entirely focus on food.

^v The National Museum of American History exhibition *Food: Transforming the American Table, since 1950* explores some of the technological, social, and cultural shifts in American food. Through different main sections we explore; Julia Child's Kitchen, New and Improved!, Resetting the Table, Brewing a Revolution, and Wine for the Table. The cultural and social changes explored here can be found in the section "Resetting the Table." <https://americanhistory.si.edu/food>

^{vi} "Voting With Your Fork," National Museum of American History, accessed April 12, 2021, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/food/resetting-table/voting-your-fork>

^{vii} "Mexican Food Revolution," National Museum of American History, accessed April 12, 2021, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/food/resetting-table/mexican-food-revolution>

^{viii} British food writer, cooking instructor, and anthropologist Diane Kennedy published the acclaimed book, *Cuisines of Mexico* in 1972. Aimed at a general audience, the cookbook is known for celebrating the rich diversity of Mexican foods and cooking techniques and is credited with bringing knowledge of regional Mexican cuisines and its history to the U.S. She is often criticized as having a strict interpretation of what Mexican cultural food dishes should be. She has also been accused of appropriating dishes and recipes. Kennedy, Diana. *The Cuisines of Mexico*. New York, Harper & Row, 1972.

^{ix} <http://www.galeriadelaraza.org/eng/events/index.php?op=view&id=7316>

^x "Dismantling Racism in the Food System," Food Fist, accessed April 12, 2021, https://foodfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/DR7_Final-2.pdf