

## A GENERAL OUT LINE OF THE ROLE OF GASTRONOMY IN COLOMBIAN DEVELOPMENT

BY Laura Hernández Espinosa



Laura Hernández Espinosa is director of FUNLEO, a non-profit organization that works to improve the welfare of Colombians understanding gastronomy as an engine for development. Laura has shown great interest in food studies, for which she has lead various projects aimed at strengthening food security and nutrition among communities, especially with afro-descendant, indigenous, peasant and women groups. Along with a degree in International Relations, a Postgraduate in Corporate Social Responsibility and a Masters in Development Studies, she is always in search of answers and actions to walk toward the development of a food culture that values the potential of Colombia's natural and cultural heritage.

Colombia is by its geographical location, an area of fertile soils that provide a variety of foods. Their fields are inhabited by rural populations who live mostly in the agricultural trade and who preserve cultural traditions vividly, maintaining the roots of the identity of the Colombian nation. The variety of regions within Colombia differ from each other, by their cultural traits that make them unique in their dances, their music and of course their food.

Diversity stems from the mix between indigenous, Spanish and African cultures, as well as other minor migrations, which have allowed Colombian culture manifestations to represent an immensely rich cultural heritage that must be preserved with pride and identity: Colombian territory is inhabited by 84 ethnic groups, a variety of natural ecosystems including tropical forests, coniferous forests, grasslands and savannas, deserts, swamps, estuaries, among others. In this range of ecosystems emerges a variety of species suitable for culinary, among these, more than 300 fruits. Colombians can practically eat a fruit every day of the year without repeating. It is precisely this diversity of biological species, ecosystems and subcultures, which allows for countless culinary preparations, spread over beautiful landscapes, that have the ability to attract visitors willing to delight their senses.

However, political disputes and social inequalities, along the Colombian history, have been in charge of feeding scenes of violence that have mainly threatened rural areas, generating displacement and abandonment of crops and their way of eating. This situation has contributed to the disappearance of cultural and culinary practices, producing an unconscious break with the rural and ancestral identity. Thus generating admiration for foreign eating patterns, which on many occasions have led to the loss of traditions, and with them of biodiversity due to decreased local biological species crops.

Within this context, the Leo Espinosa Foundation, FUNLEO, emerged as an organization that seeks to vindicate and potentiate the Colombian culinary traditions, understanding gastronomy as an axis of social

cohesion and economic development engine that allows rural communities to face certain current issues, such as food shortages, food security and food sovereignty.

Hence FUNLEO, leads processes that contribute to strengthening the cultural identity of communities through awareness and motivation of creativity in culinary matters. FUNLEO promotes the timely and permanent consumption of local, available and safe food under conditions that allow adequate use. This in order to improve and satisfy the essential basic needs and quality of life of the beneficiary populations. In recent years we have been supporting social processes of community empowerment through gastronomy, by leading initiatives involving participants on projects related to the field of gastronomy. These processes can range from agro-ecological crops, to initiatives that allow local people to recur and consolidate within the productive and commercial chains.

There are several ways to take advantage of many indigenous and nutritious ingredients that can diversify in their culinary use for local consumption and for sale. Inspiration bound in tradition allows rural inhabitants to think themselves as producers of new alternatives, through culinary innovation, adding value to traditional products. For example, afro- descendant rural communities in the Pacific coast, with the support of our team, are implementing new uses of traditional ingredients such as packed spices or sauces made from aromatic herbs traditionally planted by women for medicine and beverages. Tubers and rhizomes like achín (*colocasia sculenta*) or chontaduro (*bactris gasipaes*) are being used now for the production of flours, instead of eating them boiled, as is usually done. On the other side, they are improving ways of presenting and serving local preparations so that visitors have the opportunity to get to know their region from its traditional cuisine and local ingredients.

These strategies are deployed with the objective that rural people can get involved in development plans based on productive inclusion, competitiveness, environmental sustainability, institutional and even security; aiming to mitigate inequality, while worthily involving the rural sector within an environment that yearns for, and pursues, a scenario of peace. We recognize that gastronomy is a strategic sector, as an important employment and regional development engine.

In Colombia, the revaluation of national identities movement begins to take shape. This has led toward a tendency to emphasize the traditional cuisines and to use them as an inspiring element. Recognition is still needed, but it is essential for the Colombian nation to claim their roots and strengthen the progress with that claim. We find ourselves in a moment of transformation to achieve peace, allowing many sectors to work towards the creation of a more just and equitable society, which values the local and includes everyone with equal opportunity. In this sense, the way we eat and the way in which the gastronomic sector develops, will play a crucial role.

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This paper was written in 2016.

IGCAT's mission is to empower and facility local communities to realise the potential of their distinct food, culture, arts and sustainable tourism and local resources.

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