



**CULTIVATING COMIDA:  
 PUSHING THE BORDERS OF FOOD, CULTURE, AND POLITICS**  
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**Cacao fields and dairy cows: The interdependencies  
 between Mexican workers and the U.S. food system**

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The tamales that Miguel<sup>1</sup> pulled out of the large steamer pot as we sat down for our first interview in the summer of 2015 were a welcome treat as my stomach rumbled to remind me it had been several hours since my last meal. Wrapped in aluminum foil because banana leaves are difficult to find in the rural countryside of northern Vermont, these tamales connected Miguel to the

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**Dr. Teresa Mares** is associate professor of anthropology at the University of Vermont. Her research focuses on the intersection of food and migration studies, and particularly how diets and foodways of Latino/a immigrants change as a result of migration. She is currently examining border politics and food access issues among Latino/a dairy workers in Vermont and is writing a book on this topic, entitled *The Other Border: Sustaining Farmworkers in the Dairy Industry*, under contract with University of California Press. Recent publications include “Navigating Gendered Labor and Local Food: A Tale of Working Mothers in Vermont,” in *Food and Foodways*, and a co-authored chapter, “Eating Far From Home: Latino/a Workers and Food Access in Rural

foodways of his home in Tabasco, Mexico. In his early 40s, Miguel is one of the 1,000 to 1,200 farmworkers from Latin American laboring in the state’s dairy industry. He first arrived in 2011 to secure the year-round employment that the industry promises and has worked at two farms during this time. Supporting his wife and five children, who remain at home in Tabasco, he has only returned home once in the past six years, though he makes it a point to speak with them by phone at least once a day. For 70 hours or more

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Vermont,” forthcoming in *Food Across Borders: Production, Consumption, and Boundary Crossing in North America*.

Outside the classroom, Dr. Mares has led a number of community food projects. She is co-director of *Huertas*, a food security project for Latino/a dairy farmworkers connected to UVM Extension’s *Bridges to Health Program*, and was previously co-director of the *Food Justice Project for the Community Alliance for Global Justice in Seattle*. She is devoted to experiential, transformative modes of teaching and has advised dozens of students who seek to make a difference in the contemporary food system. She can be reached at [Teresa.Mares@uvm.edu](mailto:Teresa.Mares@uvm.edu).

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<sup>1</sup> Per Internal Review Board guidelines, all names have been changed.

each week, Miguel works in a milking parlor at one of Vermont's larger dairies, a form of agricultural labor very different than tending the cacao fields of his extended family in Mexico.

I first met Miguel about a year after he arrived to Vermont, getting to know him through my work with Huertas. Huertas is a food security project that I co-direct alongside my colleague Naomi Wolcott-MacCausland through University of Vermont Extension. Miguel had grown the black beans that filled the warm tamales as well as the ingredients of the fresh, but mild, salsa in the small garden that he tended behind his trailer with the support of the Huertas project. Unlike many Mexican men his age, Miguel loves to cook, engaging the skills he learned from his own father to recreate and share meals that remind him of home. Until just a few months before our interview, Miguel shared his small run-down trailer with two other men, both farmworkers from Mexico. One of them, Tomás, had returned to his home state of Guerrero after nearly 40 years of working on and off in U.S. agriculture. The other, Ernesto, had recently found work on a different dairy farm in the same northern county. For nearly five years, I have engaged in ethnographic research with farmworkers in Vermont's dairy industry to better understand the complicated dynamics of how these individuals access food and what their challenges might reveal about the hidden dimensions of our food system. Since beginning this project in 2011, it has become clear just how much the proximity of the U.S.-Canada border—and in particular the enforcement of this border—complicates the lives of farmworkers in the state.

Vermont is a state of many contradictions and particularities. It is a verdant place, widely seen as an agricultural wonderland where the local food movement and community-based food systems have taken firm hold of the consumer imaginary and purchasing power. Our farmers markets and farm-to-table restaurants are full of incredible

bounty. At the same time, the state's agricultural economy is propped up by a concentrated dairy industry where immigrant workers labor and live in the shadows. According to the Vermont Dairy Promotion Council, Vermont currently sells more than 321 million gallons of milk each year, with 70 percent of agricultural sales coming from this single industry. Approximately 80 percent of the state's farmland is dedicated to supporting dairy production. Dairy also accounts for 6,000 to 7,000 jobs (more than any of the state's private employers), providing US\$360 million in wages and salaries (Vermont Dairy Promotion Council, 2015).

As we see in other dairy-producing states, over the past 75 years Vermont has lost more than 90 percent of its dairy farms. In the 1940s there were approximately 11,000 dairy farms in the state; as of 2015 there were fewer than 900 (Sneyd, 2011; Vermont Dairy Promotion Council, 2015).

While a sizeable share of dairy farms (82%) have fewer than 200 cows, economic conditions have pushed Vermont's dairy farms to become larger with bigger herds to become more efficient and remain profitable, and to use more intensive milking technologies and schedules. The increased production of milk is facilitated directly by Latino/a farmworkers like Miguel and is also linked to our own shifting consumer demands, such as our newfound love of Greek yogurt and whey protein for our smoothies. While an industrialized and consolidated dairy industry might mean lower prices for consumers and profits for large dairy conglomerates, this continued exploitation of immigrant workers is at odds with building resilient, locally oriented food systems. In addition to the social sustainability concerns of the poor working and living conditions that many dairy workers experience, these workers are often excluded from participation and decision-making in the communities where they work.

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In the spring of 2017, I returned to Miguel's home for a follow-up interview, feeling a sense of urgency after the inauguration of Donald Trump because I knew that this seismic political shift was bringing with it a heightened sense of fear and anxiety to Vermont's farmworkers. When I asked him how things had changed for his in recent months, he responded with a sense of deep sadness, "There has been a change, since the new president entered. With the law that they are going to deport all of the migrants.

And because of this, a new terror began for us...We don't trust that we can go out. And if we go out, we are always looking over our shoulder for *la migra* or the police." Miguel is not unique in this regard; as I have visited with farmworkers and their families since the beginning of 2017, I have heard time and time again about their feelings of apprehension, uncertainty, and distress because of the new administration. As troubling as this may be, we must not forget that the targeting, detention, and deportation of undocumented immigrants, including those who work in our food system, is not in any way a new phenomenon.

As a border state, Vermont has a significant presence of Border Patrol and Immigration, Customs, and Enforcement (ICE) personnel, and this number has only increased since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Given this increased surveillance of the northern border, it has been characterized by some as being "Mexicanized," though of course the enforcement, topography, and cultural dynamics of the northern and southern U.S. borders are completely distinct (Andreas, 2005). During this period, Vermont has also seen an increased number of immigrants coming to work in its dairy industry. This shift began in the early 2000s, a period coinciding with an unprecedented scaling up of dairy production. As one of the whitest states in the nation (Vermont is currently the second least racially diverse state in the nation, trailing only Maine), these demographic changes have not gone unnoticed. This lack of racial and

ethnic diversity creates a situation where people of color are particularly visible when they enter public spaces, especially in rural areas of Vermont. Miguel, for example, feels a great deal of apprehension when going grocery shopping, explaining, "When I go the store I go quickly, I get what I need and I go. I don't stay around looking for things because they'll detain me. I grab my things and I leave in a hurry. It's not safe." Here is a man who, through his labor, is responsible for producing the dairy products that many of us enjoy—fearful when he is doing his own grocery shopping.

There is no easy answer to the predicament that is now confronting immigrant workers in our food system. According to the *2014 Hunger Report* (Bread for the World Institute, 2013), more than 70 percent of all farmworkers, about a third of meatpackers, and an estimated 10 percent of restaurant workers in the U.S. are foreign-born. These figures are likely underestimates, given the off-the-books arrangements that many immigrant workers have with their employers. In Vermont, as well as in states across the nation, there is a serious concern about who will fill these positions in our food system should there be the promised ramping up of border enforcement and an increase in deportations of the "bad *hombres*" who are said to be invading our country. In a time of increased hysteria about our borders, what this anti-immigrant rhetoric fails to account for is how dependent our food security is on immigrant workers and the complex political-economic histories that have left millions of farmers like Miguel with limited livelihood options back home. With the viability of Vermont's agricultural economy centered upon a profitable dairy industry, and with this industry so dependent upon immigrant workers, Miguel's future is directly intertwined with those of thousands of Vermonters, most of whom he will never meet. The time is now for us to acknowledge and honor those who feed the nation rather than continuing to dehumanize and criminalize them. 

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