

IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN

Okra and nopales are cross-cultural kin.
Let me explain.

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

THREE SUMMERS AGO, MY WIFE and I stopped in a sweltering valley just outside Pikeville, Tennessee, on our annual Southern vacation. A group of middle-aged white women had set up shop in a log cabin as part of the World's Longest Yard Sale, the summer antiques road show that stretches from Alabama to Michigan. On counters, window ledges, and tables, the ladies displayed the harvest from their personal gardens: vegetables and fruits and preserves.

Delilah bought peaches, while I loaded up on scuppernong jelly, blackberry jam, and pickled cayenne peppers. We both filled bags with tomatoes to freshen up the sandwiches and salads that would fuel our long drive back home.

It was a welcome respite after four days of nonstop eating from Frankfort, Kentucky, to Chattanooga, Tennessee. We do love the fried bologna and smoked ham sandwiches of central Kentucky, the Mennonite

hand pies of northern Tennessee, fried-chicken breakfasts at Cracker Barrels, and arroz con pollo (ACP) dinners at Tex-Mex style restaurants. What we don't see enough of along Highway 127 are the multicultural, lighter meals we favor back home—Southern California staples like tomato salads and rice bowls.

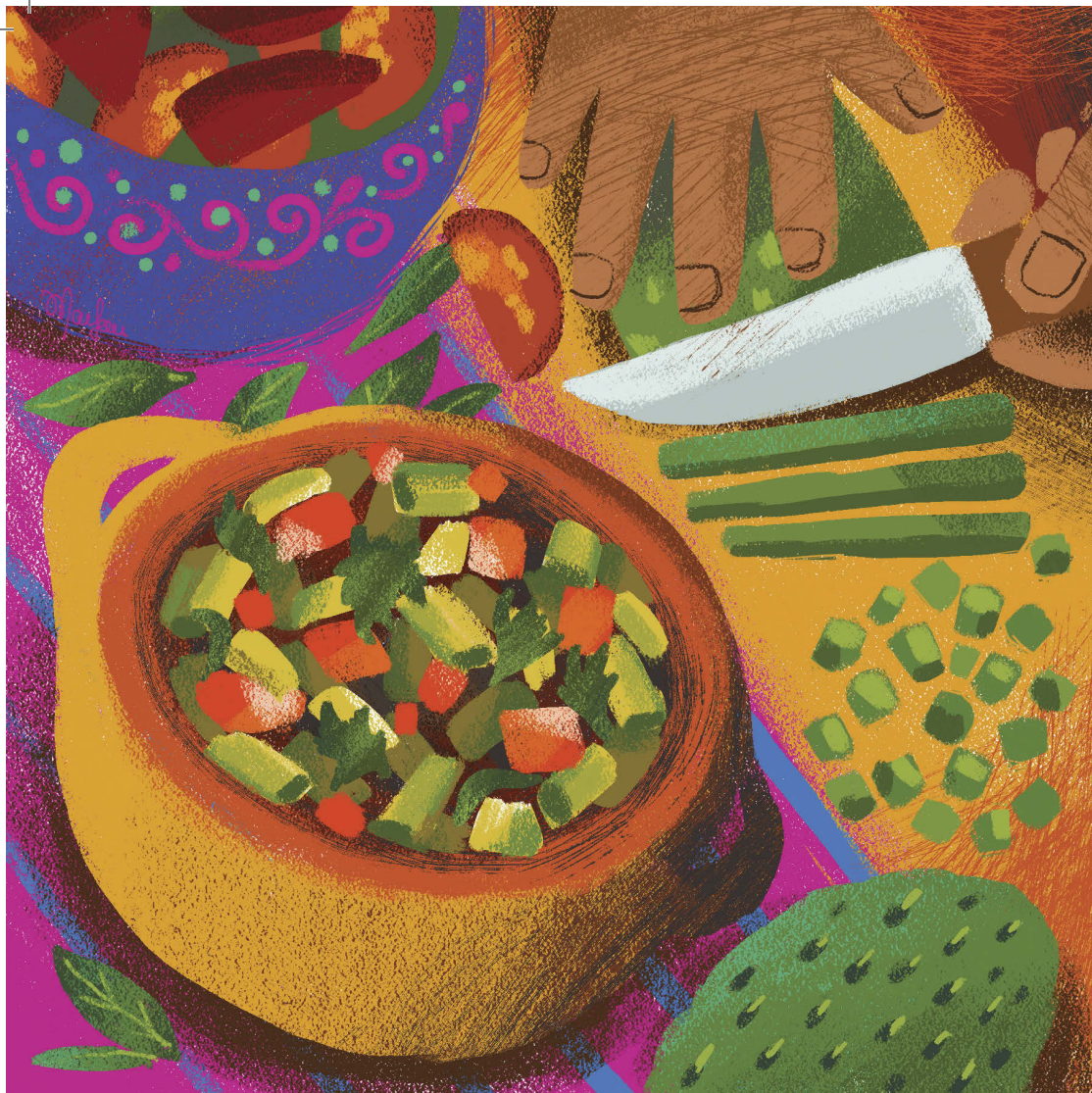
I also got a cardboard pint of something I had never bought before: okra. I didn't plan to eat it, though. No way would the pods keep on the drive back home. Instead, I wanted to save the seeds and plant them in our garden, a souvenir of our trip and a reminder to return to the South the following year.

I would've bought more okra if I had known we'd be away for so long.

For the past fourteen years, my regular trips to the South have fueled my writing for *Gravy* and other outlets. They've helped me make sense of this region and what it reveals about our changing

Illustrations by María Loo





nation. Now, my bourbon collection is depleted; my sorghum syrup long gone.

But I have the okra.

In the chaos of 2020, those okra seeds went unplanted. I forgot about them altogether until this past summer, when I went through the shoebox where we keep our seeds and found them in an unlabeled Ziploc bag.

I set out to grow a piece of the South for myself.

The small, wrinkled seeds grew quickly in Southern California's wetter-than-usual summer. I sprouted them in starter trays, then transplanted them

into individual containers before setting about a dozen plants in our raised beds alongside cucumbers and peppers. I had never seen an okra plant before, so I marveled at every step of the process. Its tubular pale-yellow flower. Leaves that looked like those of a maple tree. How the okra started off small and furry then smoothed out to grow until each pod was nearly a foot long.

I excitedly texted photos to my Southern friends, all of whom kindly asked why on Earth was I letting them grow so big. You're supposed to pick okra when the pod is about four inches long, they

told me. Let them grow longer, and okra get tough, woody, and inedible.

Oops.

My entire crop was useless save for the seeds. I'd have to wait until next summer for this taste of the South.

I looked across the yard to my nopales: towering prickly pear cacti. Its purple flowers were turning into fruit (called "tunas" in Mexico) that Delilah would cook down into jam and syrup. New paddles grew. Soon they would reach six inches in length, the perfect size for cooking and eating. I reminded myself to call my father to come harvest them.

For more than a decade I've been exploring connections between Mexico and the American South, and in that moment a new point of kinship struck me. Cactus is to Mexicans what okra is to Southerners: home and culture in a plant loved by us and looked down upon by most other Americans.

I'VE EATEN NOPALES MY ENTIRE life. The prickly pear cactus grows all over the world, but it's native to Mexico. It's so elemental to our diet and character that a big nopal, complete with tunas, is on Mexico's flag and coat of arms. We eat it mostly as a side, sautéed or grilled. My late mother used to cut nopales into strips, then jar them to ensure we could eat them year-round.

I first ate okra in college, at a multicultural festival. The Black students who presented it in a gumbo warned me I wouldn't like it. That I'd think the vegetable was "weird." I took a bite and told them it tasted just like nopales.

The two vegetables are far apart botanically, yet they share many similarities. Both are nutrient-dense; high in

fiber and antioxidants. Both can be mucilaginous—the fancy way of saying "slimy." Both grow abundantly and feature a bright green color that exemplifies nature at its most healing.

American society has largely left okra and cactus to Southerners and Mexicans, respectively. Some folks ridicule us for eating what they feel is poor people food.

When I try to get my Latino friends to try okra, their mouths curl up in disgust as they proclaim it slimy; never mind that cactus is even slimier. Similarly, I can't get my non-Mexican friends interested in cactus—they find the flavor "odd," despite the fact that the earthy notes of nopales are similar to those of okra.

We lovers of nopales and okra need to foster a culinary interchange. Each of those vegetables carry unique stories of resistance that outsiders should learn. I tell my Latino friends that okra may have come to the United States with enslaved Africans who carried those seeds to bring a piece of their native lands to their new home with them. And I tell my Black friends that Mexican immigrants propagated cactus as a free, reliable source of food. Hills across southern California are evidence of this ingenuity.

As much as I think everyone should eat okra and cactus, part of me doesn't want them to go mainstream. Let those who eat okra and cactus appreciate their full stories, not just their edible parts.

Toward the end of summer, I noticed some unfamiliar sprouts in my garden and decided to let the volunteers grow. They turned out to be okra. This time, I made sure to pick the plant when the pods were small and tender, then sautéed them in a pan and made okra tacos with rice and beans.

My South was back, if just for lunch. 🍴

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