



**Two Georgia land
and food advocates
realize there's little
distance between
their dreams.**

by **ANGELA DORE**

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From Guanajuato to Sapelo

Maurice Bailey (l) and
Maricela Vega in Vega's backyard,
Atlanta, August 2022





The rain stopped, leaving the midsummer afternoon air thick with humidity and mosquitoes.

A wet spring and summer coaxed abundance from Maricela “Mari” Vega’s west Atlanta garden: tomatoes, amaranth, marigolds, lemon balm, mint, onions. Epazote, an herb used in Mexican cuisines, nearly smothered an entire bed on the quarter-acre patch. Even the prickly pear cactus, grown from plants on her family’s ancestral land in Guanajuato, Mexico, seemed to thrive in the moist soil.

Then there was the corn, its stalks bowed from the weight of the ears. The red peas ran rampant along the ground rather than growing bushy and upright.

Maurice Bailey diagnosed both problems immediately. “This corn needs a deeper root system,” he said. “When they fall on the ground like that, they are looking for another way to survive.”

He contrasted Vega’s red peas with the ones he and his Saltwater Geechee ancestors have grown for centuries on Sapelo Island, Georgia. “These are definitely different from what we have on

Sapelo. We have more of a bush red pea rather than a running red pea.”

Vega said she was trying a Southern three-sisters version of growing corn, peas and squash; her call back to the planting techniques of her indigenous Mexican ancestors, before Spanish colonizers arrived. The experiment didn’t work as planned this year, but the corn husks held promise. She’d use them to wrap tamales, the way her mother, grandmother, and generations before them had.

Vega picked cactus paddles and peppers to prepare a meal for herself, Bailey and a couple of guests. Bailey and Vega had never met before, but both share a passion and mission: they want to hold onto their family farm land. Restoration and cultivation in service of preserving heritage and making a living.

The daughter of Mexican immigrants, Vega grew up near the north Georgia mountains in Dalton. Each summer, her parents sent her to visit family in Guanajuato, where she’d watch her grandfather



ABOVE: Huitlacoche, an edible fungus, grows on corn from Liz Porter's Buckeye Creek Farm in Woodstock, GA.
LEFT: Bailey and Vega inspect seeds of teosinte, an ancestor of corn.

walk their rugged but fertile stretch of land not far from a lake. Later, she studied international law before taking jobs in restaurant kitchens. She rose to executive chef of the celebrated Atlanta restaurant, 8Arm. She soon tired of the restaurant business, though not of food.

Today, Vega's culinary focus is on the foods of pre-Hispanic Mexico. Chico, the name of her business, is short for Chicomecóatl, the Aztec goddess of corn and sustenance. She sells tortillas, sopes, tamalitos, and other dishes she grew up watching her mother make. Vega's deep network of farmers in Mexico still use old planting techniques and heritage seed varieties specific to the region. They supply her with the corn that she processes into masa. Honoring and compensating those farmers is the root of her business, one she hopes will become profitable enough to revitalize her family's farm in Mexico.

Bailey continues the work of his late mother, Cornelia Walker Bailey, who believed agricultural revival might preserve Saltwater Geechee culture. From childhood, Bailey farmed the same crops

his enslaved ancestors did: Lowcountry indigo, sugarcane, and Sapelo Island red peas. Now, he is the president of Save Our Legacy Ourself (SOLO) and codirector of the Cornelia Walker Bailey Program on Land and Agriculture at the University of Georgia on Sapelo.

Nearly 2,000 miles separate Bailey's family land on Sapelo Island and Vega's in Guanajuato. They met in Atlanta to talk about the hurdles and possibilities of land preservation and what's lost when people walk away from the places that shaped their families. After touring Vega's backyard garden, where mullein grew tall and the two compared its healing properties, Vega cooked a feast. Sopes sizzled on the stovetop while she chopped cactus paddles for salad. She ground benne seeds and whipped them until creamy. Black eyed peas stood in for red peas. By the end of the meal, Bailey and Vega realized the distance between their individual dreams wasn't that great at all.

Editors' note: The conversation that follows has been edited for length.

Angela Dore: How would you describe your family's land?

Maricela Vega: I could see why my parents moved us to Dalton. There's a work opportunity there in the textile and carpet worlds. But also our land in Guanajuato—we're in the southern volcanic basin of Guanajuato, which is in central Mexico—it's hilly. It's got lots of lakes, lots of rivers. And because it's in a volcanic basin, it's known to be very fertile land. And so when we're heading through Appalachia and north Georgia, I'm always like, *dang, this kind of reminds me of going to my grandparents' house*. So it's very lush, green hilly, gently rolling hills.

My grandfather died in 2000, and no one has farmed the land since then. At the end, he was slowing down and doing self-sufficient farming, but it wasn't as profitable.

He got the hardest piece of land to farm, but he got the biggest piece. You can still see the old haciendas up there from the 1500s. After the revolution [of 1910], everybody in those towns split up the land and my grandfather got a piece

of land. It sits up there unused, completely.

It's been in my family for more than a century.

We live in an area rich in minerals, and people will sell their land to get the quick money and then they're back to where they began. I feel like it's a similar story.

Maurice Bailey: Yep. Once it's gone, you're not going to get it back. Sapelo is like 16,000 acres. At one point [my family] had like 1,200 acres. Now we're down to 191 acres. Once [Saltwater Geechees on Sapelo] were consolidated into one community, which started in the 1920s, we started losing that land and it never stopped. Now gentrification comes in and people want money for that land, and they're not thinking about their heritage. They're not thinking about this was their home. They're not thinking about their ancestors were enslaved here and their cost to pay for that land. They don't think for nothing except money. And once they get that money in their hands, we don't see them anymore, so we're losing land and losing people.

We get people to come back for church anniversary

Vega sautés huitlacoche with peppers and tomatoes from her garden.



or a cookout and they say, “Oh, I remember what Sapelo used to be like.” And we have some people who want to come back after they sold their land, but they have nowhere to go after they sold that land. Now they gotta pay that price for lodging, because they sold their place and somebody else turned it into an Airbnb.

Vega: Yeah. Similar stories. People sell off their land and it gets mined and they want to come back because they realize that the US doesn’t pan out as they want it to. There’s that depiction that you come to the US, you make a lot of money. But you have to spend a lot of money to make any kind of money, and then it’s too late. By that point, you can’t buy the land back.

Bailey: Once it’s gone, it’s gone. If you sell for \$5,000, the next person is gonna sell for \$250,000.

Dore: When did your family start buying land?

Bailey: We started buying land in 1871 on Sapelo from one of the white families over there, but

eventually we started acquiring more land. But then we started losing the land in the 1920s. There was a lot of land that was given to Black people [by white landowners] to farm, then years later, the Black people find out they did not own that land. [Previous] white owners of land on Sapelo would tell Black people, “This is your land. This is your house if you work for me.” There was no documentation. Back then, your word was your bond. So, if they were told, “This is your land; This is your house,” that’s what they took. We didn’t know anything about going to the courthouse recording deeds.

Vega: Even in Mexico, I’m not saying that I’m nagging, but I’m always letting my uncles and my aunts know that, look, nobody’s farming the land and you really need to have documentation because this piece of property could just go away.

Dore: Are there any ancestral practices associated with what you produce—medicinal, ceremonial—or any foods that are significant in the traditions you’re carrying on?

A sope topped with benne cream and huitlacoche





CLOCKWISE FROM CENTER: Maricela Vega, Maurice Bailey, *Gravy* deputy editor Rosalind Bentley, and Angela Dore talk over lunch in Vega's Atlanta home.

Vega: Every single day my work revolves around nixtamalization which is a 10,000-year-old process. It's me processing my corn. The foundation of the business is nixtamal is just what we call the dough once it's been in the alkalization of calcium hydroxide. We take X amount of corn and put anywhere from .6 percent to 2 percent of calcium hydroxide to create this chemical reaction so that our stomachs can digest this corn. It releases a lot of nutrients, and it enhances the flavor profile. And just practicing this technique reminds me every single day of how genius these people were.

Bailey: Ours is the red peas. My mother's vision was that the red peas would be the saviors of our community: red peas grown by enslaved people. That is our Hoppin' John. And red rice. You gotta put that ham hock in there for flavor. That's our traditional recipe. Then there's sugarcane that was introduced to the island by Thomas Spalding, who enslaved us. Everybody on the island grew it, then took it to this one guy's house, where he'd grind it and create that syrup. I remember

that growing up—that syrup was our sugar for whatever we'd make. Very hard work. We still harvest sugarcane by hand, and we still grind by hand. We have an old-fashioned grinder and we stick the stalks in there one or two at a time.

We like that part of our history, but there are mixed feelings about it. The old people say, "We've done this. I don't feel like doing it no more." And the young kids say, "This work is too hard." But everybody loves the end results.

Dore: Mari, do you have anyone in your family engaging with food the way you do?

Vega: Just on subtle levels. It's the same notions that Maurice is talking about: "It's too hard. We've already done this." If they're in the US, they say, "Why should we do that if nobody does that here.?" If they are in Mexico, it's the same thing: "You guys don't do that in the US, so why should we do it here?"

People ask, "Why do you do this?" And I'm like, "Because I care about this." I like good nutrition. I like to make sure I'm providing nutrients for

“Every single day my work revolves around nixtamalization, which is a 10,000-year-old process. It reminds me every single day of how genius these people were.”

the people I’m selling my food to. I wouldn’t do it any other way. How else am I supposed to create these flavors?

I also like the adaptation. I like adapting to the Southern ingredients we have here and recreating who I am now, because I’m not 100 percent from Mexico. I only spent my summers there when I was a kid. Every time I go, I only scratch the surface. So, I have to interpret my cuisine as a Mexican in the South; so, benne. In Mexico we use a lot of sesame, we use a lot of amaranths. But I use benne.

Growing up, I didn’t have this. I never thought that I would be using landrace corn or peppers from Mexico. You could never do that when I was growing up in North Georgia. Like in the late 1990s, there was a big caravan that would come—and we were all Latinos—and you would make a list of what you wanted and this man dedicated his life to being an importer and exporter in some ways. That’s how we used to get special peppers or sugar cane so we could have it for the winter time and have our special drinks.

So just experiencing that at such a young age, it absolutely made sense that I ended up in this world right now. Having that pride, because [growing up] it was like, “I don’t know if I should tell everybody I’m Mexican, because everybody’s looking at me weird.” Now, as an adult, I’m like, “Being different is great, and don’t let anybody tell you otherwise.” So that’s a big reason I do what I do.

Bailey: We went through the same thing, where being different was not accepted. So you basically

had to change and forget who you are just to be accepted. A lot of our language and culture disappeared because we were told if we did things a certain way or if we speak a certain way, we weren’t accepted. But then it came full circle and now they want to see Gullah-Geechee people. [White tourists] want to see us perform. They want to hear us talk. But when we were being ourselves back then, they didn’t want us to be ourselves. And now, we don’t want to talk for them no more. Years ago, when the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor first got started, a lot of people in these towns in this corridor said, “We’re not gonna be a spectacle for you and put on a show.”

Vega: My parents never assimilated. They still are not assimilated. They’ll speak English enough to get by. They are very modest people. For them making it out here, seeing their kids in school, seeing their kids graduating past high school and doing something with their lives: That was their big fulfillment. They always thought they were gonna go back to Mexico. But they bought a little ranch house here and that was enough for them. They came from very impoverished conditions where a pastry for them was a huge thing to have. Anything that wasn’t off the land was a huge thing for them to have.

Bailey: I think I know your parents. It’s the same for us growing up on Sapelo. Living off the land. Not missing things because we didn’t know what was out there to miss. And just wanting to hold on to who we were and who we are. 🍷

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