



# Digest

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## Clay Pots in Bolivian Campesino Culinary Practice: Cooking with Earth and Smoke

By: Katherine L. Turner

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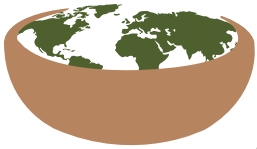
Photos: Katherine L. Turner and C. Julián Idrobo

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### First Life

The round belly settled in the embers and blackened by smoke is a constant on the hearth. A few pieces of wood are added, growing and rekindling the greying coals. The contents slowly churn, traveling with the bubbles to the surface and sinking back in steady rhythm. Meat cooks slowly rendering it tender, and dried corn, called *mote*, rehydrates and softens. There is always a pot of *mote* cradled at the edge of the fire. In water or milk squashes, legumes and tubers are stewed. In a dry, hot bottom deep purple corn kernels spotted with white are stirred to make *tostada*. Many dishes are made this way, with the properties of the clay pot mixing with the wood smoke to shape the textures, flavors, and mold the life history of the food.



# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

---



## The Center: Minds and Agency

“We would sit on the ground, with my mother and her clay pot. Us around her. The pot of *mote* in the center.”<sup>1</sup> Cooking leaves an echo, an imprint of the labor, the action of hands and minds<sup>2</sup>—that have imagined and brought into being the dish, a meal. An entanglement of human and non-human agencies: people, clay, plant, charcoal. The pot must be tempered prior to use. Some cure a new pot by resting it in a coat of beef lard and corn flour; others by boiling it with flour and water. This seals the pot and ensures a longer life. “A few small pieces of wood, and the pots will boil all day,” they don’t burn, they hold the heat, they turn the food soft, imbue a delicate texture, a rich flavor.





# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

---

## The Birth

The vessel is made of clay, sand, and water, built slowly, adding pieces to one another growing higher, gaining shape and being smoothed: a seamless composite. Rounded at the bottom, not to rest on a table, but to find stability in coals and ash. Clay gathered close by or brought from farther away affords different colors and different properties. The potters know where to go. Pots are made only in the dry season when drying and firing can be done properly. Completed, the vessels are fired in simple kilns with animal dung and urine to give heat and color to the hardening clay.





# Digest

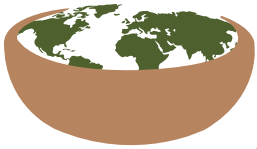
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## The Hands

A vocation and a livelihood, often passed on parent to child. In a small town, La Calama, an elderly brother and sister are pot makers. Their father taught them, they learned; all their siblings did. Neither makes very many now. They are old, the clay cold and hard on their hands. A grandson explains, “Grandfather now only makes them to order.” His great-grandfather’s remaining pots, alongside those of his grandfather, live in a special room. Families like theirs of generational potters are becoming fewer. It takes grandfather a week to make three pots.





# Digest

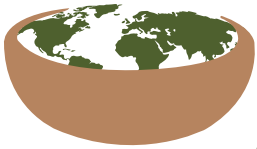
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## The Search

It is hard to find clay cookware now. Few people know how to make it. It is expensive at the Campesino Market in the City of Tarija. “Before it was a luxury to buy aluminum, Teflon. That is to say it was only the rich people who could. Now everything is metal. Now it is more of a luxury to buy a clay pot than an aluminum one.” Now clay vessels are expensive. “They are, and more than that they don’t last . . . . This one has lasted well—ten years or more.”



# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

---



## The Practice

“Now we put the *mote* in iron.” It is the fastest thing in the pot now. “Faster and more practical.” When possible, the flash of ignition and the heat of a gas flame. “Current generations aren’t accustomed to using these basics like wood fire and clay because they don’t have the knowledge.” It is the old people who buy the clay pots. And the flavor, do you miss it? Yes, I miss it. “No one continues to make pots,” the grandson explains, “because society discriminates against them.”





# Digest

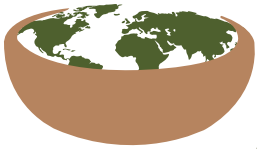
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## Plastic Barrels and Plastic Bottles

Wine: a tradition in the Valley going back to the Spanish conquest. Grape vines brought to give the blood of Christ, the fruit's juice fermented in great vessels of clay tightly sealed. A sweet wine, mingled with tannins and aromas of earth. One family, a small sign outside the home marked "*vino patero*."<sup>3</sup> They are artisanal winemakers. They have a room for wine making lined with a dozen pots, too large to wrap your arms around. One is a hundred years old—a family inheritance, shown proudly. Another *vino patero* maker, her clay vessels bought from her mother-in-law, carefully kept; they are hard to replace. Many have replaced them though or bypassed them all together. Plastic barrels are recommended.<sup>4</sup> More hygienic, the authorities claim. *Vino patero* is illicit. Not real wine. It is served in gourds from smaller wide-mouthed clay pots and on Corpus Christi in the center of a hollowed-out tuber, *ajipa* (*Pachyrhizus ahipa*).<sup>5</sup> These ways of serving are the old ways. Special ways, not the glass bottles and long-stemmed glasses of the industrial, global wine culture. Lightly fermented drinks, *alojas* and *chichas*, also circulate this way at the markets and fairs. Women wheeling large flat carts, a huge clay pot in the center, in it peanut or barley *aloja*. These are also made by boiling slowly in clay over the fire.

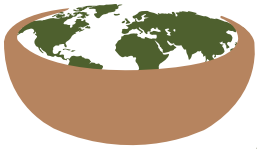


# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

---





# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

---

## The Vendor

She brings her pots first by donkey. Two hours to reach the road. Next by truck eight hours. She brings clay cooking pots, jugs, and urns, huge vessels for *chicha* making, tiny toy pots smaller than your fist for children. The largest are 150 Pesos Bolivianos, the toys 50 centavos.<sup>6</sup> Most fall somewhere in between. She explains how they are made. Beautiful and intricate designs can be added, but those don't sell. Too much time, the price too high. She comes for the annual Festival of San Lorenzo, the town's patron saint, and makes pots for months to bring. Mentioned by many as one of the best, one of the last, places to find good clayware. Three or four vendors make the annual journey. There are few potters like her. Few who still depend on dirt cheap pots, alongside cultivating their fields and tending their herds.



## Second Life

Time, a fall, a slip, a slow crack. Clumsy hands, heavy weight, hard ground. So may end the first life. Sometimes the second is brief. Disposal, reduction, pulverization. Other times, however, second life can be long and glorious. Life on a shelf or in a corner. Still cherished, if ignored. Or pieces bound together and reinforced with wire or string. Earth, roots, and new life. Or something simpler: a nest. A place in the garden.



# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

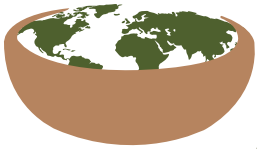
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## Re(dis)covery

Loss in time, in labor, in knowledge, in skill, in purpose. Aluminum, tin, iron: now cheaper, now ubiquitous at the market and in the kitchen. Light, flat bottomed, and ready for a gas stove and modern foods. Quick foods—rice, pastas, a chicken soup, frying oil—ready for fast cooking and eager eating. But the slow boiling, the flavor of clay and smoke linger.

On a Sunday, urbanites travel. Going forth from the city in their cars or on the bus—a small van filled with passengers. Seeking out a creole hen soup or one of the thick stews called *ajis*, *picantes*, *saice*, and *ranga*, of ground yellow or red chili peppers with beef, tripe, or pig feet. Prepared by someone who knows how, made with ingredients from the countryside, the *campo*, made the old way and cooked in clay. Flavored with smoke. These, they say, are real, more authentic,



# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

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more natural. They taste better.

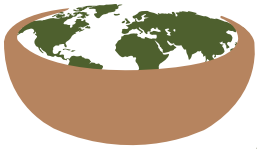
Many roadside stands, many front rooms with simple tables and benches, many rural women and their families who earn their living cooking and serving from hardened clay. Fairs, festivals, and celebrations are spaces to congregate. To sell *chancho a la olla*—a stewed pork called “pork to the pot.” Drink *chicha* or *aloja* served with a gourd dipper from a wide clay mouth. A few restaurants as well catering to the day trippers, the small middle class, the wealthier families, the nostalgia for flavors, the mingling of past and present. Kitchens designed especially for open fires, clay pots, and the milieu of agency and materials. A slow simmering, a continuity, a resurgence.

## Background and Acknowledgments

This essay draws on twelve months of fieldwork in the Central Valley of Tarija, Bolivia, in 2012 and 2013, on edible biocultural heritage in rural territorial development processes. Data were gathered through multiple methods including extensive semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, visits to homes, participant observation at fairs, festivals, markets, and restaurants, and surveys with vendors at public markets and fairs. Change and continuity in regional and household agri-food production, exchange, and consumption were the focus of the research, and clay cookware and fermentation vessels were a subtle yet recurring theme entwining personal histories, contemporary economies, food practices, and tensions over tradition, identity, and modernity.

The personal stories, feelings, and reflections surrounding the role of clay pots in contemporary Bolivian campesino culinary practice are an example of knowledge and experience that are often muted in academic and public discourse. While further details on the research methods and larger study can be found in Turner (2016) and other academic journal articles (including Turner et al. 2016; Turner, Davidson-Hunt, and Desmarais 2017), we wanted to explore this aspect of our work through a creative ethnography format. By interweaving images, quotes, and descriptive text, we believe the photo essay expresses an intimacy and nuance around the changing relations with traditional materials, such as clay, in ways that a regular paper format does not capture.

We are deeply grateful to all in the Central Valley who made this research possible and shared their stories, experiences, and likenesses with us. Turner



# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

---

made return visits to key interviewees, research participants, organizations, and local authorities in the Central Valley in 2016. She provided Spanish-language summary documents and copies of publications to individuals and organizations. Additionally, towards the end of fieldwork in 2013, she printed copies of photographs taken with many research participants and their families as small thank you gifts. Besides the Central Valley individuals and families involved in this research, we thank the following organizations for their collaboration and support: JAINA–Comunidad de Estudios, RIMISP–Centro Latinoamericano para el Desarrollo Rural, Asociación de Turismo de San Lorenzo, and Gobernación Sub-Sección San Lorenzo. We are also grateful to Ingeniera Fidelia Romero Lopez, Profesora Leonela Valdez, and Marina Pastrana for their collaboration, patience, and many insights and helpful suggestions during data gathering.

This research was approved by the University of Manitoba Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board. Funding was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (IP Iain Davidson-Hunt research grants SSHRC 410-2010-1818 and 890-2011-0113; and SSHRC Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship, Doctoral Scholarship to Author 767-2011-0128), and the Canadian International Development Agency and Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada's Students for Development Program (Individual Internship Award to Turner).

## Notes

- (1) Quotations are from interviews conducted by the authors in the Central Valley of Tarija, Bolivia. We have left them anonymous to protect participants privacy and confidentiality.
- (2) Labor as a dialectic process of hands and minds comes from Wolf (1982:75).
- (3) *Patero* from the Spanish verb *patear* meaning to stomp or kick, referring to the process of crushing grapes with the feet.
- (4) The Bolivian National Viticulture Centre and other capacity building organizations recommend plastic barrels to artisanal winemakers.
- (5) See Advisory Committee on Technology Innovation Board on Science and Technology for International Development National Research Council (1989:39).



# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

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(6) At the time of research, 150 BOB was around 22 USD and 0.50 BOB was around 0.07 USD.

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