mean, remains there in the cut-off feet, still clenching at Andean soil. With a toothbrush Mama Sarita would brush out the last bits of this dirt from between the thick, elegant toes, and then she would get to work on the meal.

With the feet, Mama Sarita made a rough and tumble meal, caldo de pata. Caldo de pata is the most life-giving of Ecuador’s soups. You can find it all over Quito, and always in the early morning. It is served outside, at dawn, the chilliest place and time on earth, under the city’s stinging sky. The soup drips with pig fat. Its steam rises in greasy yellow clouds.

Above: Sara Granja Arroba in her garden, Quito, Ecuador, 1985. Courtesy of Paulina Vaca

By the time my grandmother, Mama Sarita, had reached her saint stage, she could find pigs’ feet “ready-to-cook.” A trip to the butcher, a walk back, a packet under her arm. In the packet, two clean and hairless feet, cut below the knees. Pink. In her tiny lighted kitchen, Mama Sarita would cradle the pair in her palms, as though she had just happened upon the sheared paws of a creature from a fairy tale.

The feet of the pig, she’d say, are its daintiest parts. The pig walks on a delicate tiptoe, in a sort of mid-pirouette. Its feet are ballerina elegant, soft with fat, fleshy and quaint.

They are its very pigness—the parts that prod the Ecuadorian earth. The pig’s senses, his nooks and crannies, everything that makes him fight and grunt, grow pink and
In later years, with her sainthood firmly entrenched, Mama Sarita could find feet in inch-thick rounds, and things became much easier. These rounds were cut butcher-style, as though fed through a deli slicer, although the rounds were much thicker. The foot’s inner architecture was on ready display here—a snapshot of swirling tendons, ligaments, and muscles wrapped in a tight cocoon, protecting the delicate bones that had been strung along the length of the foot like pearls. Mama Sarita had to do little more than drop the rounds into a great big pot filled with water. She would then throw in some mote, giant coarse hominy made from kernels of Andean corn. She boiled the liquid, stirred in a scallion and lard for flavoring, and sofrito for a perfect whole of the animal, were destroyed by the onslaught of water. The kitchen would fill with the smell of hot blood.

After about six hours the feet fell to pieces. I remember, as a child, feeling pain when the bones and flesh, the perfect whole of the animal, were destroyed by the onslaught of water. The kitchen would fill with the smell of hot blood. Small holes hollowed out inside the bones, and through those tiny tunnels, the pig’s pigness—its medulla—would finally seep out.

I always thought, as I witnessed this process, that caldo de pata smelled human, like the sweet sweat of an unwashed person. You can pick that piggy human smell out anywhere, particularly at those busy, sun-shot farmers markets that Quito used to be full of, the ones that are dying now. It was always there underneath the nervous sweat of live chickens, the new rot of the dead ones, the gaping pig heads, the dug-up onions and earth-packed potatoes. It was with the women and their boiling pots of caldo de pata—that tart smell of briny and bony pig juices, that hard, slow destruction of raw flesh and mote.

After the twentieth hour, the finished broth would be full of yellow pockets. These blobs came from the melted fat, and also from collagen. Collagen makes pigs’ feet tender and beautiful—it binds all the bits of living matter together. It is gelatinous—an ingredient that once gave structure to meringues and dessert jellies—and when boiled oozes freely out of everything: muscles, tendons, and bones. Unlike the murky broth in yahuarlocro, Ecuador’s blood potato soup, or the bright orange bath that soaks guatita’s diamond-patterned tripe, caldo de pata is translucent and shiny, at once golden, brown, and gray—a tempest in a pot.

Mama Sarita’s hands were pink, and as she handled the pigs’ feet, they glistened. She stirred the soup, and the brilliance of the melted fat glowed under the soft lights of her kitchen. The mote, which on dry land are as tough as toenails, had worn down to rubs. The flesh of the pig slackened into loose pink meat. The little round toe and knucklebones floated freely. We children craved that part the most—the tangy, slippery knucklebones.

Years before, Mama Sarita had planted a patch of rose bushes within view of the kitchen. The delicate blush of those roses matched the pink of a living pig. By the time the pig had ceased to exist, the roses, cut from the garden, were already resting on the kitchen table like jewels. Mama Sarita spooned some caldo into a bowl for me, a whole seeping foot at the center. She had set a few feet aside to put into the finished soup. In that twenty-hour broth its sudden appearance was a sort of miracle.

The soup itself—the taste—was powerful, a dropkick in the gut. The broth, under Mama Sarita’s expert hands, had evolved into something with meaning—it held the living animal, its very being, its piggy self.

Growing up, my grandmother had hardly had a home-cooked meal. She learned to cook pig (and everything else) only after she married, under the hard hand of her mother-in-law. She was living on a farm by the Cotopaxi volcano when she faced her first pig—when it was enormous and alive, and then when it was slaughtered and in pieces: the head, the shoulders, the wide sheets of belly fat, the pointy, otherworldly feet.

In truth, I never liked my grandmother’s caldo de pata. It was too strange for me, even though the strange dishes were the ones my family loved the most—the slimy guatita, the bloody yahuarlocro. But in that rarified air of the Andes, caldo de pata isn’t a quirk, or even a desire. It is a basic need. In my family, only Mama Sarita could quench that need. The soup she made helped each of us live that day. That’s what caldo de pata does—it gets the down, the ailing, and the weak through the day. My grandmother’s certainly did. She handed out the soft, yielding tissue of the pig as though it were the blood from her veins. Mama Sarita—pig-killer, life-giver.