A Tortilla Is Like Life: Food and Culture in the San Luis Valley of Colorado
Carole M. Counihan
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xiv + 253 pp. Illustrations. $24.95 (paper)

By the time you finish reading A Tortilla Is Like Life by noted food anthropologist Carole M. Counihan, you feel as though you have traveled to the small town of Antonito in the remote southern San Luis Valley of Colorado and shared leisurely conversations with its women residents about changes in their land, livelihoods, food, and culture over the course of their lives. In this beautiful feminist ethnography, the author has created a forum for women’s voices and experiences, providing her readers with an intimate perspective on their community. Counihan spent eight summers with her family in Antonito and distills her extensive field notes and interviews into eleven chapters. The chapter titles juxtapose women’s direct quotes alongside topical subtitles, as in “‘Anything You Want Is Going to Come from the Earth’: The Traditional Diet” and “‘We’ve Got to Provide for the Family’: Women, Food, and Work.” The result is 253 pages of what Counihan calls “food-centered life histories.” The Antonito women are her “research partners,” free to turn the tape recorder off and on as well as correct and delete transcriptions, and the final product is an engaging collaborative enterprise.

We begin with a map of southern Colorado and northern New Mexico that provides the spatial context for a discussion about the changing meanings of land and water, and the foodways and people they support. Antonito was registered as 90 percent Hispanic in the 2000 census. Place names on the map such as the Rio Grande River and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains are testimony to the region’s roots in what was part of Mexico until the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848, when the country was forced to cede nearly half of its territory to the United States. This history sets the stage for the complex ethnic identities expressed by Counihan’s subjects, some of whom trace their family origins and land ownership to that period and consider themselves Spanish, and others who identify with Native American ancestry or the Chicano political movement. Musing on the associated, confusing terminology, one collaborator, Teddy Madrid (b. 1934), says she calls herself Hispanic in English and Mexicana in Spanish (p. 40). Counihan adopts the latter, a self-referent for Hispanic Americans from Antonito, not to be confused with the English term “Mexican,” meaning from Mexico, an identity most rejected. Later, we learn how ethnic identities are maintained across religious differences through food shared during mourning rituals.

This work describes challenges faced by hard-working women living in a cold, dry region once dominated by a mixed farming and ranching subsistence economy. While some couples’ relationships were more egalitarian than others, feeding the family was “an important channel for enacting gender” (p. 143), with women expected to be “preparers” and men “providers.” Cooking was always women’s duty and men’s choice. By describing food-related gender roles and divisions of labor, the author makes visible women’s work and agency while giving the reader a sense of daily and seasonal activities in kitchens, gardens, school cafeterias, the community Food Bank, and even the mountains. Readers glimpse some of the negotiations that occurred inside marriages when women did not want a life devoted to domestic chores. Some women applied skills from their home kitchens to paid jobs in food service, and some men used the cooking skills learned at sheep camp to help out in the home. Teddy’s husband began by cooking fish, eggs, beans, and potatoes and later ventured into making American cakes, Spanish biscochitos, and Mexican tamales. Helen (b. 1926) delayed marriage as long as she could to avoid the pressure that ensuing domestic expectations would put on her career as a teacher; she told Counihan that she was not “a kitchen guy” (p.118) and was happy with a husband who supported this choice by sharing the cooking.

Counihan concludes by describing Fourth of July meals in Antonito, with their combination of local and global, homemade and processed, and Mexican and American foods. She zooms out abruptly to the scale of the nation and switches from women’s stories of the past to her own analysis of factors affecting the Antonito diet today. The ending is a little disconcerting, particularly given the insider/outsider subtext that permeates the book. For readers of many ethnicities, however, these final pages may bring them closer to the inhabitants of this small town who are increasingly disconnected from their community’s cultural and natural heritage. The book culminates with a sense of loss symbolized by the child who misunderstood the word maíz—the Spanish word for corn—for “mice” (p. 85).

—Maria Elisa Christie, Virginia Tech