

What Will I Feed My Family Today? Food Decisions during COVID-19 on the US-Mexico Borderlands

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Figuring out what to feed my family is not so simple. Although I grew up with rice, beans, tortillas in a large Mexican family, my small nuclear family is diverse in cultures and religions, which makes meal planning a bit more complicated. I am a Chicana anthropologist born in California, raised by a spiritual healer who migrated from southern Mexico to join her husband in the United States to work as migrant farmworkers. My husband immigrated to the US from the North African Muslim country of Tunisia. My kid is a mix of Chicano, Arab, and Texan. The meals I prepare at home are from southern Mexico, New Mexico, North Africa, or a fusion of Mexican and North African cuisines. My husband eats halal. I eat mostly Mexican dishes, and our son is mostly into turkey sandwiches and ramen. Note that, like toilet paper, local stores are now also out of ramen and we are down to three packages in our pantry.

Being at home with a family and working full time presents a number of challenges concerning what to feed a family during the COVID-19 pandemic. The question “what will I feed my family today?” seems to have taken on a different meaning. I rely a lot more on creativity and resourcefulness to work with what I have in my refrigerator and pantry. Recently, I have gotten into the habit of cooking and then taking pictures of my dishes and posting them and my recipes on social media. Other friends have responded by posting their meals to share what dishes they have come up with. The responses I get to these posts usually include questions on how to make certain dishes and notes from friends and family who appreciate the prompts that encourage them to cook as well. Seeing what someone else is cooking has become like peeking into their kitchens and their lives. These daily postings of meals help me connect with others and help generate ideas for the daily challenge of trying to decide what to feed our families during a time of home seclusion. From the time our stay at home

began with spring break in mid-March, the internet has become a lifeline for cooking and sharing recipes, as well as our main source for connecting to my work and for homeschooling our child.

The food on the US-Mexico border in El Paso, Texas, is a fusion of Mexican, New Mexican, and West Texan cultures and cuisines. New Mexican green and red chiles are staples in our homes and are stocked in our freezers, refrigerators, and pantries. Flour and corn tortillas and different types of cheeses occupy a privileged place in our refrigerators to make tacos, burritos, and tostadas with as many fillings and toppings as we can imagine. The burrito in particular is a working-class meal that offers the luxury and flexibility to pack an entire meal within the confines of a tortilla. We have specialized burrito shops in our border region. Many of these food businesses migrated across the border from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, to El Paso during the height of the “drug war” in 2008–9. Burritos Crisostomos are my favorite because they have soft, handmade tortillas with a variety of fillings. Although I crave their burritos, I weigh out the risks and decide to make my own at home: bean burritos for my son, cheese quesadilla with Tunisian harissa for my husband, and New Mexican green chile with cheese and beans for me.

It has now been two weeks since the City of El Paso passed its “Stay Home, Work Safe” order that went into effect on May 21st. As of April 10, 2020, we had 225 confirmed cases of people with COVID-19 with one fatality in El Paso and 26 confirmed cases and 10 fatalities in our sister city Ciudad Juárez—we are aware that the numbers of infected people and the death toll in our community and worldwide are rising. Many El Pasoans are uninsured, low-income, and food insecure, those employed in service jobs and health care are deemed “essential workers” are at greater risks of exposure. In Juarez, maquiladora workers are getting sick at higher rates. We gain hope when we hear that people are recovering and we are saddened that older adults are

not as likely to recover. Despite such events always lurking in the background, I go into the kitchen every day and look into the refrigerator and pantry, wondering what I will make to feed my family today? Breakfast options and lunches tend to be easier to prepare, dinners take more time, thought, and effort. I look forward to making one of my fusion dishes so that I can share it with family and friends, mostly through images and short stories shared via social media and text messages as my own way of coping with the stress and uncertainties of life and death during COVID-19.

We are now in week four of staying put and studying and working from home. My husband decided to go back to

graduate school and has loads of homework. He is the one who ventures out to get food at the supermarket during this quarantine. We have incorporated walking into our routines to burn what we eat and to stay moderately healthy. He takes longer walks and I join him somewhere in between. Sometimes we talk about how we are doing and what we need at home, other times we walk in silence. A couple of days ago my husband said, “I will go to the store, you don’t need to expose yourself, our son needs you more than he needs me.” I never imagined that going to the supermarket, or even swinging by a burrito shop, would be an event that involved the risk of catching a virus, getting sick, and not being around to raise our child. 🍷