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Manioc

A Brazilian Chef Claims Her Roots

STEPPING INTO THE STATELY HALLWAY that leads to the dining room of the renowned restaurant O Navegador (“The Navigator”) in downtown Rio de Janeiro, there is no hint that one is entering a hotbed of agricultural and cultural activism. The restaurant is perched above the city’s Naval Club, a regal building that has been part of “culture row” in the Centro district since the early twentieth century. For more than thirty years, O Navegador has served as a meeting place for businesspeople, politicians, and celebrities. The main dining room can accommodate one hundred and fifty people, and additional private rooms often act as event spaces for up to two hundred. Stained glass windows filter the hot Rio sun, chandeliers hang from high plaster ceilings, original and immaculately polished hardwood floors creak underfoot, and each table is carefully laid with white linens and a full, elegant place setting. But in the back of the house, in a tiny and cluttered office tucked behind the kitchen, sits the restaurant’s owner and executive chef, Teresa Corção, working on the project that is her passion: Instituto Maniva, an NGO dedicated to promoting the culinary uses and cultural preservation of manioc in Brazil (*maniva* is the Portuguese word for manioc leaves).

Manioc’s history as a food predates the nation of Brazil by thousands of years, adding weight to the root’s cultural importance. Current consensus among researchers is that cultivated manioc (*Manihot esculenta*, commonly known in English as *cassava*, and in Brazilian Portuguese most often referred to as *macaxeira*, *mandioca*, *aipim* and *tapioca*, depending on the region and style of preparation¹) originated from the wild variety *Manihot flabellifolia*.² A member of the Euphorbiaceae family,³ it can be traced to a point of origin near the southern basin of the Amazon River close to the border between the Cerrado and Amazonas regions of Brazil.⁴ Since its discovery by humans, manioc has played a foundational role in the diets of peoples native to the area. Travelers’ accounts have long documented the use of the manioc root throughout the territory that is now Brazil, noting its resilience in the face of drought, the ease

of its planting and harvest, and its versatility in culinary preparations.⁵ Since the founding of Brazil as a Portuguese colony, the root has been transported to and cultivated in many regions of the world. The movement of African peoples back and forth across the Atlantic brought manioc from its native land to the African continent, where it took hold as a staple crop in many countries.

Today, Brazil is struggling to reconcile massive internal migration and urbanization with an economy that is still largely dependent on agriculture. The vast majority of the food Brazilians consume originates within its borders, and with modern technologies there is plenty left over for export. However, subsistence and small-scale family farmers, as in most areas of the world, are facing new economic realities and pressures. Conflicts between farmers and agribusinesses over land in Brazil have made international headlines, with resistance from peasant groups such as the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Landless Workers Movement), commonly known as the MST, at the forefront. Over the span of one generation’s lifetime, millions of Brazilians have moved to cities, abandoning their rural communities. Some go by choice, seeking better work and educational opportunities for themselves and their children, while others have been pushed off their land by pressure from the corporate sector and the state. Yet a sizeable rural population remains, dedicated to cultivating the land and producing food using ancient, small-scale methods.

Advocates for ecologically sound, economically viable, and regionalized food systems in Brazil have, until recently, been working at the fringes. But to some, it is clear that Brazil’s newfound economic stability and growth, and the increasing number of Brazilians accruing disposable income and a taste for finer things, may have a real role to play in protecting and preserving Brazil’s enormous diversity of native foods, their producers, and the country’s distinctive culinary traditions.

Teresa Corção is an unlikely advocate for the humble, yet emblematic, root. Born in 1955 in Rio de Janeiro in the



Cosme Velho neighborhood, Corção grew up surrounded by intellectuals, including her father, Gustavo Corção, a prominent Catholic thinker and influential political writer.⁶ But her childhood was a lonely one. She was the youngest of six children, and her parents had become less animated caregivers by the time she was a young child. Yet in a home that Corção describes as often feeling sad, food was a source of vivid joy. Corção's mother was deeply interested in serving her family nutritious food and had an intuitive instinct and creative flair in the kitchen. The aunts of the family, too, brought their own gastronomic prowess, each with her own specialty served at family gatherings. Corção's memories of the food culture of her home extended beyond her immediate kin. "The kitchen was the one place where the house was shiny and lovely," she remembered, "because we had this maid who was singing all the time, full of joy

Above: Teresa Corção with her beloved manioc root.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TULIO THOMÉ © 2010

and life." Not only did the family's domestic servant inject vivacity into the household, she often needed an extra set of hands with her work. Corção, often left without playmates at home, was eager to assist.

As a child, she learned to chop and knead. "I was always watching and was fascinated at the gift and choreography of kitchen work. I remember sitting on a stool at a big table in the old house, looking at this lady with a headscarf killing a chicken in the back of the house, and she cooked with the blood. I was fascinated by the transformation of food."

Corção soon began experimenting on her own in the kitchen and fell in love with the work of preparing and serving food. But formal classroom study was the order of the



Above: Farinha d'água (*manioc meal*) and dried shrimp at Seu Bené's manioc farm in Bragança, Pará, Brazil.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MANUEL LAMPREIA CARVALHO © 2006

day, the culturally appropriate thing for a young woman born to a middle-class, intellectual Brazilian family. Corção studied graphic design at university in Rio and then pursued graduate work in London. By 1978 she was back in Rio, with a British husband in tow.

In need of steady income, Corção turned to the kitchen, preparing desserts for her sister's three-year-old restaurant, O Navegador. She slowly began to take on more responsibilities and eventually became the head chef. She worked with a staff of male cooks, most of whom hailed from Brazil's northeastern states—a poorer and more remote region of the country where the African influence is more pronounced. Though the line cooks and sous chef were preparing classical French dishes, they themselves had no connection to the food. “They were cooking things they didn't eat,” Corção remembered. Traditional Brazilian food was still largely relegated to home kitchens, while fine restaurants were serving primarily French or other “Continental” food, considered, at the time, the epitome of fine dining. Corção laughs as she remembers the “Frenchified” food the employees of O Navegador would prepare for themselves at staff meals—rice, beans, and *béarnaise*, for example. “Depending on how you look at it, it was either fusion or *confusion*.”

For Corção, this recognition was a major turning point in her thinking about both Brazilian cuisine and food's place

in constructing identity. She became deeply interested in the other cooks—in the foods most resonant in their memories. “I began to think, ‘why don't we talk about Brazilian food, why don't we know these ingredients?’” She dove into historical texts and talked with her kitchen staff about their food memories. Intrigued by her findings, she gradually introduced more “folkloric” Brazilian dishes into her menu.

Still, her knowledge of traditional Brazilian foods remained limited. At a chef's gathering in Pernambuco, each of the cooks was given a list of ingredients with which to work. Corção was startled at how many of them were derived from the manioc root and realized she hadn't known how ubiquitous the plant was in her own country's diverse cuisines. She wasn't alone. Most of the chefs at the gathering were as baffled as she was about how to prepare dishes using the manioc products. Corção was leaving her hotel room one morning when she spotted an older woman preparing tapioca crepes at a small table. “I introduced myself, told her I was a professional cook, and asked her, ‘How do you work with this flour?’ The woman exclaimed, ‘This is starch, not flour!’ So I asked her how to make this starch. She raised an eyebrow and replied, ‘You are a professional cook, you've never been to a *casa de farinha*?’ I shook my

head, and she looked at me as if she was seeing a Martian. She said, 'You must go.' She started to tell me about how manioc becomes so many other products. She was my first teacher. She taught me how to make *tapiocas* the proper way, and I began to make *tapiocas* at the restaurant."

While continuing as O Navegador's executive chef, Corção dove headlong into the history of manioc and its numerous derivatives. She became, as she says, completely obsessed. Beyond the walls of the restaurant kitchen, she began teaching schoolchildren in Rio's *favelas* (slums) how to prepare tapioca crepes. Inspired by the deep cultural history she encountered while researching manioc, she, along with her colleague Margarida Nogueira, founded Instituto Maniva.

THE STARCHY MANIOC ROOT is processed into many products and used in a variety of ways in Brazilian food. There are two widely cultivated types of manioc in Brazil, the sweet and bitter.⁷ Sweet manioc, also known as *yuca*, can be used straight from the ground. In contemporary Brazilian cooking, this variety of manioc is found on tables throughout Brazil in deep-fried strips (commonly called *aipim frito*). It is also boiled and mashed to become an ingredient in a number of types of fritters; one example is the popular northeastern specialty *bolinhos de macaxeira recheado*, stuffed with ground beef.⁸

More common in Brazilian cuisine, however, is the processing of the bitter type of manioc root into various grades of meal, known as *farinha (de mandioca)*. Bitter manioc is toxic (manioc contains deadly concentrations of cyanide) unless properly processed.⁹ Methods for removing the toxins from the tuber vary throughout Brazil and the world; they can involve peeling, boiling, steaming, slicing, grating, soaking or steeping, fermenting, pounding, roasting, pressing, drying, and milling.¹⁰ The leaves of the plant, known as *maniva*, can also be used in culinary preparations. They too must be boiled and processed to remove toxins. They are high in protein, making them a natural complement to the root, which has a low density of this essential macronutrient.¹¹

In Brazil, the most common artisanal method for processing bitter manioc involves grating the root, then pressing the pulp to remove toxins and moisture, then toasting the dehydrated pulp in a sieve-like device until it is completely dehydrated and the grains are separate. At this final stage the granular pulp becomes *farinha*.¹² Various grades of *farinha* are used widely in Brazilian cooking—for example, in a simple condiment of the grain toasted in oil (called *farofa*) or as a thickening agent in stews such as the northeastern and Amazon specialty *vatapá*. It is also commonly mixed with grated hard cheese to make the ubiquitous street

food *pão de queijo*, or cheese bread. The starch that results from pressing the root is dehydrated into a fine white powder used to make simple, snow-white, crepe-like pancakes called *tapiocas*¹³—the ones to which Corção attributes her introduction to cooking with manioc. It also forms the basis for crisp, delicate baked cylinders called *bejus*.

For millennia the manioc root was vital to the peoples native to Brazil, and it became the lifeblood of the Portuguese colonists who settled there. The Portuguese were accustomed to a diet containing great quantities of breads made with wheat flour. However, in Brazil, particularly in the southeastern regions (such as present-day Santa Catarina), the settlers' desperate attempts to cultivate wheat were thwarted by the climate. Looking to indigenous groups for guidance, they saw the prevalence of flour derived from the manioc root and soon adapted their wheat-based bread recipes to manioc flours. Today, wheat is still a tricky crop in Brazil, though it remains very popular. About 80 percent of the wheat used in Brazil is imported. Meanwhile, Brazil's current manioc crop makes up about 30 percent of the global production of roots and tubers.¹⁴

ONE DAY, ON A VISIT to the Amazon port city of Belém, Corção found herself wandering through a series of stalls set up outside the conference hall. A beautiful leaf-wrapped bundle held together by woven reeds caught her eye. These special baskets, called *paneiros*, were being sold by a weathered farmer in a wide-brimmed hat, who told her that the bundle contained a special kind of manioc flour. He explained that the dried leaves in which the flour was wrapped could preserve the flour for up to a year, even in the region's muggy humidity, but that few people know the art of weaving the reed baskets anymore—the ones on the table were mainly just for show. Corção told him about her workshops with schoolchildren in Rio. He handed her his contact information, gave her the beautiful basket as a gift, and asked her to stay in touch.

A year later, Corção received a call from a sociologist, Maria Dina Nogueira, who had spent the past five years, at the behest of the Ministry of Culture, documenting the various types of manioc flour and their producers throughout Brazil. The government, she explained, was trying to establish cultural patrimony on manioc and needed data in order to do so. In the state of Para, where Belém is located, a small producer had told Nogueira about a woman in Rio de Janeiro who was teaching young children how to prepare *tapiocas*. And so she set off in search of that woman—Corção. The two immediately hit it off once they discovered how much their work had in common.

The conversation with Corção left her itching to learn more, so she sought funding for research in Brazil's distant corners. Her story caught the attention of a representative of Varig airlines, who asked Corção to make an in-flight film about the manioc "saga" in exchange for plane tickets to support her travels. Soon Corção and her second husband, Brazilian film director Manuel Lampreia, were en route to Belém. They borrowed a car from friends, crashed on couches, and phoned the manioc flour producer Corção had met nearly two years before to ask if they could film his work. He gladly introduced them to another friend, Mr. Bené, a longtime producer of *farinha*, who agreed to host them at his operation in Bragança, a municipality about two hundred kilometers to the east of Belém. "I was stunned," recalls Corção. "It was my first time in a *casa da farinha*, a flour house like that. And it was my first time in the *real* Amazon." On the third day of filming, Mr. Bené offered Corção an afternoon snack. He presented her with one bowl of Amazon prawns and another of coarse, golden-toasted manioc flour he had just made. "To me, a *lanche*, or snack, is bread and butter. But this was so healthy, so native to that place! 'This,' I thought, 'is *culture*,'" Corção said.

Inspired by what she had seen in the Amazon, she returned to Rio determined to find a way to help support small farmers and producers like Mr. Bené, who had so carefully stewarded these culinary traditions into the modern era. She placed a standing order for Mr. Bené's beautiful *farinha* for O Navegador but knew that she had to find other supporters. She began to work with Mr. Bené and other small producers in Bragança to develop a plan to increase their sales of the flour and thus stimulate production. Despite the three thousand kilometers separating them, she felt an intense connection to this community of producers. Today, Bragança's artisanal *farinha* business is thriving: nineteen isolated communities in the region have become involved. At a recent festival of São João, the most important holiday of the year in Brazil's Northeast, producers drove their trucks into town and set up *farinha*-making demonstrations; each day featured a different local producer.

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS Corção has integrated more and more traditional dishes into her repertoire at O Navegador, and the cooking classes, now taught by Nogueira, have been taught in nineteen different *favelas*. The Instituto Maniva project has been in place for ten years and has served over three thousand students.

Corção explains her ever-expanding commitment to the humble manioc root as a growing commitment to pure Brazilian culture rather than to the mix of culinary tradi-

tions with which she was brought up. "I have a protective feeling over the recipes. I don't really like to make fusion on top of a traditional dish, so I have a split menu. On one side are traditional Brazilian and Portuguese dishes. That side has gotten richer over time, as I have more and more traditional ingredients to work with. The other side I call 'world and creations,' which is my license to be creative." Rio is, increasingly, a magnet for Brazilians, drawing migrants from all over country. Connecting with her customers' memories of food is essential for Corção. "People come to my restaurant for lunch because few go home anymore. I love this; it means I can be a mother with my food."

Though much of Instituto Maniva's activity continues to support producers in remote corners of Brazil, the organization has recently become involved in a project a mere stone's throw from O Navegador. At the Rio city limits nineteen families have been working as an agricultural cooperative for many years now. All are of Japanese descent, a legacy of the Brazilian government's call for immigrants to work in the agricultural sector in the early 1900s. On arriving at the cooperative for the first time, Corção asked to be given a tour of the fields and to be shown their products. "The earth was black," she exclaimed. "So fertile!" The families had begun by producing tomatoes and then had shifted to miniature okra, persimmons, green coconuts (harvested for their water, a popular street beverage), and sweet manioc. When one of the farmers pulled up a whole manioc plant, Corção spotted a tiny manioc near the stem. She asked about the small root. The farmers responded that they were usually thrown away or given to the animals. Corção, always culinarily minded, declared, "Let's create baby manioc!" Corção took the root to one of the farmers' homes and prepared it as she would any fresh *aipim* for a dish in her restaurant, only to find that the manioc was extraordinarily tender and flavorful. She immediately suggested that the family begin marketing the baby manioc to chefs and hotels in downtown Rio, and she explained that the farmers could charge much more if they worked directly with chefs and other high-end buyers. The growers laughed, since they had been selling manioc to street vendors for years. Like most farmers in the region, they grew the roots to full maturation, which yielded only a measly profit. But Corção persisted, assuring the farmers that their product was superior. She promised to spread the word among her network of chefs. Sure enough, when other chefs got a taste of the baby manioc, the farmers began to earn four *reais* per kilo for what they had considered a waste product suitable only for animal feed—four times what they had been making for mature roots.

But their success didn't last. In the late spring of 2010 a huge iron factory, Thyssen Krup Companhia Siderúrgica Brasileira, was erected next to the family-run agricultural site. The factory changed the flow of a river that ran through the site, flooding the farmers' fields and upending their livelihood. The families protested against the factory, and Corção found herself in the middle of the fight, attending press conferences and acting as an advocate for the farmers. "Now we have to go out there and film, make a project," she cried. "They are too much in danger of losing their land, and we as chefs are in danger of losing this incredible product that is now in demand!"

Instituto Maniva's work could not be more timely. As recognition of global crises increases, considerations of economic development, environmental sustainability, and the universally essential need for food have become ever more apparent to policy makers worldwide. Chefs and farmers, Corção believes, should be leading the charge to support the remaining family farmers and provide incentives for the next generation to continue in sustainable, small-scale agriculture. Today, Instituto Maniva's primary goal is to find the people and places that need assistance in the production and processing of endangered Brazilian foods and help them sustain their work (though manioc is her pet project, Corção has expanded her program of assistance to producers of other traditional products). The Institute also seeks to demonstrate that small-scale family agriculture can be a viable economic option for future generations. For Corção, the environmental, economic, and cultural importance of preserving the traditional ways of growing and processing manioc represent the priorities food systems must embody if they are to provide nutritional and culturally appropriate food for their citizens and promote responsible stewardship of the land.

TO CORÇÃO, the Rio baby-manioc farmers are just one example among many others in jeopardy; throughout Brazil the livelihoods of countless producers of manioc and other important crops are being destroyed to make way for residential, manufacturing, and agribusiness developments. "We have already lost many manioc products. The colonizers used it and valued it, but we've gone from about five thousand varieties to only fourteen hundred. Recipes have been lost as a consequence, too. Brazilian Indians, all of them, ate manioc. If you're talking about the Amazon, manioc is *everything*. About 80 percent of what Amazonian populations eat is derived from manioc. Our former president, Lula, ate manioc almost exclusively for the first seven years of his life. He was poor, and it was cheap and easy to

grow...The small-scale farmers are the guardians of manioc, and we have to protect and honor them."

In our most recent conversation, Corção invoked the memory of the woman who had first enticed her to explore the origins and uses of manioc. "I returned to that same festival five or six years later, and the same lady was there. But she had become a chef and everyone was saying, 'Lovely *tapiocas*!' Before, everyone ate *tapiocas*, but no one was thinking about them. As a result, they had no value. I went up to the lady, reminded her of our encounter, and said, 'You've changed my whole life!' I told her about the projects, teaching kids how to make *tapiocas* in the public schools. She was overjoyed." The *farinhas*, tapioca flour, and other manioc products are now deemed artisanal due to their rarity, but if Corção has her way, they will reenter the mainstream of Brazilian gastronomy and once again be common on tables from humble homes to fine restaurants. "These products, they are surviving because people really love them. Culture is stronger than globalization," Corção asserts, her voice stubbornly optimistic. Yet she is not immune to modern realities. Sounding sadder, she softly concludes, "But I don't know whether they will endure unless we work to save them." ●

NOTES

1. Christopher Idone, *Brazil: A Cook's Tour* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1995), xii.
2. "Cassava: Wild Relatives," *Seeds of Trade* (London: Natural History Museum, n.d.), accessed 20 June 2011, www.nhm.ac.uk/nature-online/life/plants-fungi/seeds-of-trade/page.dsm1?ref=cassava§ion=crops.
3. Yara Castro Roberts and Richard Roberts, *The Brazilian Table* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 2009), 21.
4. K. Kris Hirst, "The Domestication of Cassava," *About.com Guide* (n.d.), accessed 20 June 2011, <http://archaeology.about.com/od/caterms/qt/cassava.htm>.
5. Roberts and Roberts, *Brazilian Table*, 21–23.
6. This information, as well as all additional firsthand information about and quotes from Teresa Corção, came from several conversations beginning in January of 2010 and culminated in a formal interview on 8 July 2011.
7. C.R. Loss, "Latin Cuisines Research Team Returns from Brazil with Regional Flavors and Manioc," Culinary Institute of America Department of Menu Research & Development (1 June 2010), accessed 20 June 2011, <http://menuscience.ciachef.edu/node/442>.
8. Jessica B. Harris, *Tasting Brazil* (New York: Macmillan, 1992).
9. Loss, "Latin Cuisines."
10. Ibid.
11. Roberts and Roberts, *Brazilian Table*, 22.
12. *Professor da Farinha*. Directed by Manuel Lampreia (MadeForTV Productions, 2004).
13. Harris, *Tasting Brazil*.
14. Roberts and Roberts, *Brazilian Table*, 23.