



PREAMBLE

Tale of a Voyage

Introduction

Between 1823 and 1825 the British government envoy, Col. John P. Hamilton, traveled through the provinces of Colombia, a country that had recently completed its Wars of Independence, was devastated by losses, and had its economy in ruins. Despite all that, he had the opportunity to be pleasantly surprised, particularly in the Greater Cauca region, where he was treated with the greatest courtesy, as if he were the lord mayor of London.

The foods that Hamilton ate—the meals he shared and the smells and flavors that fascinated him—were the product of three centuries of transculturation,¹ a multiethnic stew that was a blend of pre-Hispanic, Hispanic, and Afro-descendant culinary wisdom, creating a unique tropical cuisine, where rivers and meadows, winds, ardent summers, and eternal snows mixed. It was a cuisine of abundance, traditional and exotic, replete with unexpected combinations, a barely glimpsed, forgotten feast that, almost despite itself, provided an undercurrent for the Latin American way of being in those regions of great environmental diversity and imposed slavery.

In Popayán, amid the multiple receptions and tributes, some of which featured Spanish wines forty years in the aging, which the affected Englishman could not enjoy because he found them “too sweet and heavy,” he was surprised on two occasions, to which he dedicates special attention in his memoirs. On the first occasion, at the bishop’s home, he remembers that “the feast was what one might expect for a bishop. . . . Fish and fruit were served that I had never seen before, and all these exquisite victuals were copiously irrigated with aged Malaga, as well as other Spanish wines.”²

Although no mention is made of it, the banquet must have begun with some sort of soup or perhaps with some portions of fufú, mentioned in Jorge Isaacs’s

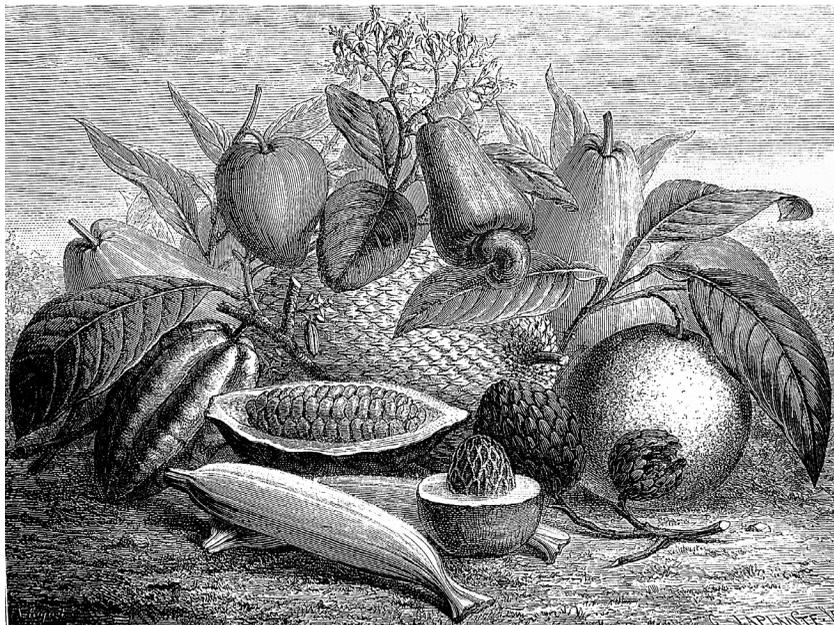


FIG. 2 A. Faguet, *Assorted Fruit*, 1869

María, which was green plantain dough cooked in a hearty broth, perhaps a reduction made of the juices of the fish to be served as the main dish.³ The Malaga, if we are to believe Dumas, must have been made by confectioners and would be reminiscent of a muscatel, but maybe not as sweet as those aged wines that were too strong for Colonel Hamilton's palate, for on that occasion he voiced no complaint.⁴ Dionisio Pérez, in *Guía del buen comer español* (Guide to good Spanish eating), confirms for us this appreciation in suggesting that the older Malagas were elaborated by using raisins as a starter.⁵

Fish with fruit? With fruit "I had never seen before," meaning tropical fruit. This starts to look like the fare of contemporary auteur cuisine or of ancient Asian dinners, but it was served at the most traditional of Cauca tables, that of the bishop, in the most traditional of New Granada's cities, Popayán, and in 1823, no less. It should not strike us as strange, then, as we shall see later, that in a normal home in the Cauca Valley countryside, the meal would revolve around a dish of fish with fruit. Further back, almost a century before, a Dominican priest given to fine dining had been caught serving a combination of shellfish and green papaya salad.⁶ For Mr. Hamilton, who was chary in praise, those were "exquisite victuals."

Not having yet recuperated from this delicate offering, in a most singular event, he and his assistant were hosted by Carmelite nuns—who were known to

go to great pains to set a good table—and were served, as a jewel of their cookstove, a turtle soup that, it was later known, was prepared by a black novitiate with a “most beautiful voice for song.” The grave Englishman lost his composure and confessed, without regret, that he had three servings of that “delicacy.”⁷ The colonel’s secretary, a young man whose name does not matter, suffered unimagined effects from the soup and slipped away during a momentary lapse in the vigilance of the mother superior, who later found him in a forbidden place and in animated conversation with the attractive novitiate. Mr. Hamilton hastened to offer embarrassed apologies and then wrote stern reflections on the shortcomings in character of the new generation of British youth.

At some time before, other young people—Creoles who at that time were in their eighties—gave testimony to the consistently high quality of the cuisine proper to the geographic valley of the Cauca River. One of the reasons why the cattle drives from Florida to Palmira were unforgettable was the routine stop at a farmhouse on the banks of the Bolo River, beyond Pradera, where the black cooks were always at the ready to serve the cowboys fragrant casseroles of turtle soup, accompanied by toasted plantains and white rice, which was washed down with a burning carafe of *aguardiente* (brandy), sometimes distilled on the premises, in the clandestine stills that have continuously existed since the advent of sugarcane in the Cauca Valley in the sixteenth century.⁸ About the effects of the stimulating soup on the temperament of those other young people of the decade of the 1940s we will not comment, for the mulatto population sprinkled about those parts provides the best documentation possible in this regard.

But fish and turtles as main dishes in the Popayán of the early nineteenth century—especially if, as Hamilton himself noted, the Cauca and its tributaries in the Pubenza Valley were poor for fishing, owing to the acidity of rivers such as the Vinagre and the sulfurous springs that fed the streams? Fish and turtle were served for two reasons: because it was a matter of meals for special occasions and because, farther north, in the greater Cauca River Valley, that river and its tributaries served as a veritable emporium of piscene and amphibian riches, however difficult that may be for us to imagine today.

As to the first point, it was the intention of the bishop and the mother superior to serve His Majesty’s envoy something special, something that they themselves considered proper to singular occasions. This is a cultural trait that still bedevils us. A certain inferiority complex and the idea that the foreign—ideally the European—is better than all the rest, and especially better than our own, are relevant characteristics of the Latin American cultural universe, especially among the upper classes.

They could just as well have surprised him with a tasty squash tamale, or a *carantanta* (corn-based) soup, or with Creole-style ground beef, all of these swimming in chili-spiced peanuts and, of course, accompanied by numerous fruits,

among which would stand out, and still does, the custard apple.⁹ But, just like the custard or fritters that Isaacs mentions in his novel *María*, this other menu was too popular, in a manner of speaking, too commonplace. It was necessary to take recourse to what was not within just anyone's reach, a quality that speaks to the buying power of the homeowners, their influence—noteworthy in the case of the bishop—and their effort to recognize the important guest, serving him what was out of the ordinary. That explains, for instance, the aged Malaga wines, which they could have done without, replacing them with a freshly fermented *masato de chontaduro* (sweet dessert wine)—the best of all, according to Friar Juan de Santa Gertrudis—or with a soursop sorbet.¹⁰ As the seventeenth-century Spaniard Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas wrote in verse, “It is not the fish you eat, but the fame, / the cost, and the exotic, which are prized.”¹¹

Regarding the second point, they in any case had at hand the fish and turtles native to the Cauca River Valley. The truth is that these fish and amphibian dishes were fare produced by the region's black women well before that of the *ñapan-gas* (mixed Spanish and indigenous young ladies) of the Pubenza Valley, where the city of Popayán is located. They could not have come from the Pacific coast because the distance to Guapi and Timbiquí is great, rendering it impossible for the fish to arrive in an acceptably fresh condition. Popayán's elite, eager to impress the British ambassador, had a tradition of fine dining and knew that a splendid platter of seafood depended entirely on its being the same day's catch. Even today, despite all the advances in refrigeration and food preservation, that ancient truth still stands.

Understanding this situation takes us back to a more remote past, to the beginnings of our peculiar process of racial mixing.¹² The exact date was Saint Michael's Day of 1540, which is to say, September 29. That morning in Vijes, New Granada (later, Colombia), on fifteen bamboo rafts, or broad reeds, as the Spaniards called them, Jorge Robledo and his troop, a few black slaves, and Indian servants embarked on the first documented navigation of the Cauca River. It was a true voyage of exploration, lasting two weeks and ending in a tumultuous shipwreck at the rapids just beyond Sopinga, near today's La Virginia, in the present-day province of Risaralda. The chronicle of this expedition has been preserved; it is one of the most colorful of the Spanish Conquest, penned by the scribe Juan Bautista Sardella.¹³

It is of interest that the Spaniards truly suffered, especially from hunger, as they did not carry sufficient provisions. To the Afro-descendants who accompanied them, this world was just as unknown, and the Indian servants either were Yanaconas brought by Sebastián de Belalcázar—in which case they also found themselves on unfamiliar terrain—or were waiting for both the whites and the blacks to die so that they could flee into the jungle.¹⁴ Hunting in the clearings of the enormous bamboo groves that covered both banks of the Cauca River was an



FIG. 3 A. de Neuville, *Young Mestiza Women of the Cauca Valley*, 1869

exact science at which they failed: the fish of the Cauca were not easily hooked, the turtles appeared only at certain intervals and almost always at night, and the playful *agoutis* were slippery water dwellers that brought sweat to the brow of even the most experienced hunters.

Fortunately, after several days' suffering, they met some natives who "came with meals of corn, yucca, and fish, of which there was very great need," according to Sardella's narrative. This is the basis for food and eating in the Cauca Valley, not only in that period but also for at least the first century of colonization. It is true that soon would come along the banana, already known to the

Africans, and rice (Asian but also cultivated and enjoyed especially by the Africans), which would be essential to the diet, above all in regions where slaves abounded. But “corn, yucca, and fish” would form an essential tripod basic to the traditional cuisine of the Greater Cauca region.¹⁵

The fishing was so abundant that it exceeded their nutritional needs. The natives who helped Jorge Robledo were, according to Pedro Cieza de León, the Gorrón Indians, thus called

because when in the valley they established the city of Cali, they named the fish *gorrón*. . . . They came loaded with them, saying, “gorrón, gorrón.” . . . These Indians live at some distance from the valley and the main river (Cauca), at two and three and four leagues, and at the appropriate times they would go down to the lagoons and that main river, whence they would return with a great quantity of fish. . . . They kill an infinite number of tasty fish, which they give to the travelers and sell them in the cities of Cartago and Cali and elsewhere. . . . They have large warehouses of them dried to sell and great jugs filled with lard, which they get from the fish. . . . This province of the gorrónes is very abundant in corn and other things.¹⁶

Fresh fish, very tasty, large deposits of dried fish, large jugs of fish lard: that is the main source of protein for nutrition and the foundation of the traditional cuisine of the Cauca Valley, as well as of the fat for the African slaves’ fried dishes and, of course, the base for Spanish stews.

Our regional cuisine, simmered during several centuries of racial mixing, was fully formed before the end of the colonial period. And in that cooking one always finds, among many other things, an abundance of fish, amphibians, and aquatic mammals in the Cauca River Valley, not to mention the Pacific coast, in easy contact with Cali as of 1539. Some testimonials, gathered shortly before the start of the Wars of Independence (1808–9), would remind us of a good part of the forgotten banquet feast.¹⁷

Don Cayetano Núñez, district mayor of Riofrío during that same period, tells us that the locals dedicated themselves, among other activities, “to catching fish, for in the Main River there are *bocachico* [literally “cute mouth”], *jetudo* [big snout], catfish, and shad, the fishing of which is accomplished with hooks, nets, and harpoons.”¹⁸ Don Pedro José de Soto, in charge of the town of Yunde, on the highway that today connects Cali to Candelaria, informs us of “the catching of medium-size fish produced in the marshes associated with the Cauca River: the name of this fish in general is *bocachico*, which they catch by hook or net.” Don Pedro José Guerrero, from Jamundí, notes that “of the aforementioned Jamundí River, where fish abound, the most exquisite, among which are the *barbudo* [bearded one, *Pimelodus blochi*], shad, sardine, *jetudo*, *rayado* [striper],

sabaleta [small shad, *Brycon henni*], along with the most common which they call bocachico, are caught in the upper reaches and are of extremely delicate taste.¹⁹ Don Luis de Vergara, the city attorney for Cali in that same postindependence war period, reports, “fishing, in the lagoons of the Cauca River, with various sorts of nets at their respective peak seasons, produces by the hundreds what are called bocachicos, an ordinary fish that sustains the poor people; and *veringo* [literally “naked one”], a species of scaleless *aquil*; catfish; barbudo; *sardinata* [*Pellona castelneana*]; and shad, which are all appreciated. . . . Also common are capybara, otter, muskrat, turtle, iguana—all water-dwellers.”

These testimonials should suffice, for they are repeated with few variations throughout the whole territory, as far as Cartago. Food was so abundant that the physician Evaristo García, at the start of the twentieth century, complained of the laziness of the Cauca Valley mulattos, for it was enough to cut a bunch of bananas, which grew wild, and to toss out one’s net, to take care of the family’s needs for the day, with a surplus for any guests.²⁰ Then one would go off to make *aguardiente* in the still that was hidden in the bamboo thicket. That is the source of all the parties, the numerous children, and “so many unruly darkies.”

Besides all this, there was the port of Buenaventura and the rivers that flowed into the Pacific, which like a magnet attracted landowners from the Cauca Valley and from Popayán for their riches in gold, and Buenaventura was the only place to engage in trade with the outside world. Through that port would pass European liquors, conserves, salt, sometimes wheat flour, olive oil, and, to be sure, coconut products. Of course, there were also more fish of other varieties, shellfish and crustaceans, and abundant meat from aquatic mammals, among other things.

Of those water dwellers, other than the freshwater turtle, whose soup we have already discussed, another animal stands out for its delicate meat and caught the attention of Mr. Hamilton. When he reached Buga, after his stay in Popayán, he wrote that “one finds in the great lake near the city the *agouti*, an otter-like mammal of darkish color with white markings on its sides. . . . The meat of this animal is in high demand.”²¹ It was, to the utmost degree, and with good reason. Its meat is lean and delicious, and it can be prepared in a variety of ways. It was so coveted that the peasants of the Cauca Valley figured out how to raise *agoutis* in captivity, notwithstanding the technical difficulties of maintaining enclosures of woven bamboo through which fresh water could circulate. The *agouti* can still occasionally be found in the rivers of the Pacific, and it is a special occasion to consume it in a splendid stew, in which the delicate meat cooks over a low fire, simmering in abundant coconut water.

Despite the growth of agribusiness and the consequent contamination of our waters, which have extinguished the unimaginable abundance and variety of the fisheries, the tradition still survives among the common people. Black cooks

continue to prepare bocachico soup or steamed catfish. Different varieties of fried fish, prepared on outdoor cookstoves, with toasted banana chips and fresh *lulo* juice, constitute a breakfast that is greatly appreciated by the sand diggers of Juanchito, the stevedores of Cavasa, or the porters of Jamundí.²² The same meal is enjoyed in the evenings as well, but without the *lulo* juice, by exhausted pairs of dancers decked out in multicolored costumes. This ancestral taste for diverse seafood has expressed itself from the Ecuadorian coast to Buenaventura in the popular consumption of shrimp ceviche, which is sold everywhere, from market stands and supermarkets to portable kitchen carts. Its poor cousins, smoked baby shark and canned tuna ceviche—both highly recommended—also please the popular palate.

The “exquisite victuals” that in 1823 the British ambassador was accorded, if indeed not common fare in the noble city, were therefore part of the daily cuisine of the mulatto folks who dwelled in the northern part of the province of Popayán. The routine consumption of different species of fish was an integral part of the new Creole culture and was attributable to the abundance in natural resources.

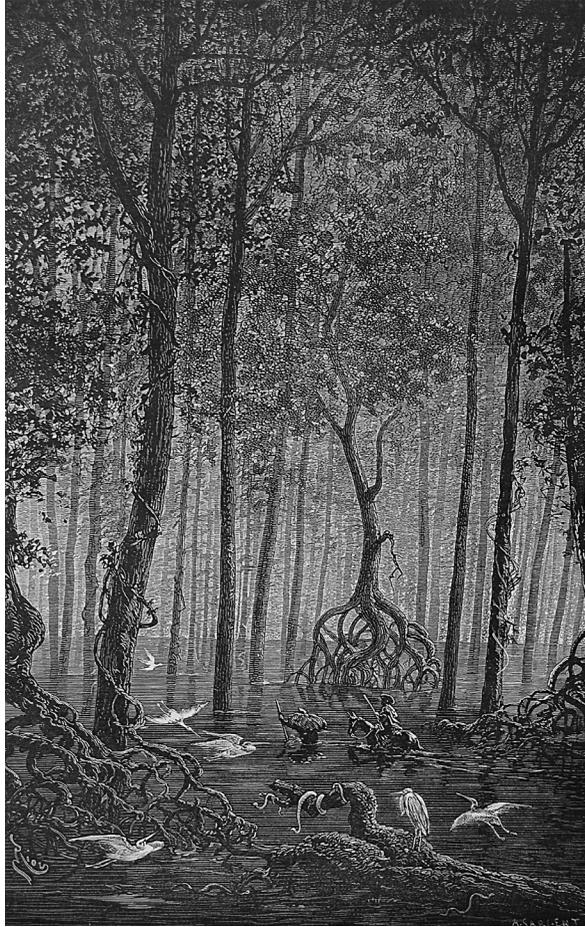
But then, just a few days later, between Cali and Palmira, upon dining at the hacienda El Bolo, he finds that “we were served a meal combined in the most curious of ways: first the soup, then a plate of vegetables, followed by beef and fruit, and then sweets and cheese.”²³ In the land of the turtle, the fish, and the *agouti*, instead of them all: beef. We again find a combination that seems to be of our own time: meat and fruit—plus cheese, a combination that requires a healthy dairy industry. But in those days nothing came from outside the region. By then the territory of the Cauca River Valley had been transformed into the largest livestock emporium in the country’s collective memory.

Then Came Pigs and Cattle

Cultural nostalgia of the most powerful sort, that pertaining to the taste buds, led the Spaniards who settled the Cauca Valley to spend fortunes in the early days to bring to their tables a pork shoulder or nice cut of beef loin. Cieza de León reports in the decade of the 1540s that when the conquistador Cristóbal de Ayala died, in Buga, his goods were sold at extravagant prices, “because a sow was sold for 1,600 pesos, along with another pig, and small pigs were sold at 500. . . . I saw that the same sow was eaten one day when there was a banquet . . . and Juan Pacheco, a conquistador who is now in Spain, sold a pig for 225 pesos. . . . From the wombs of the sows one could buy, before they were born, the suckling pigs for 100 pesos or more.”²⁴

Very soon thereafter Sebastián de Belalcázar brought cattle from Peru, and pigs and cows began to thrive in Greater Cauca, from Pasto in the south to

FIG. 4
E. Riou, *Flooded
Pine-Nut Swamp*,
1875–76



Cartago in the north. From the visits paid by an anonymous author between 1559 and 1560, and then in 1582 by Friar Gerónimo de Escobar, we find documentation of growth in the livestock population of the entire region.²⁵ The anonymous author says of Popayán, “The houses of the Spaniards are generally made of adobe walls, and they are covered with tiles. They raise all types of livestock, cows, sheep, goats, and mares, and the best horses to be found in the Indies are from that city and from Cali.” “Livestock” in this case means pigs—that is, herds of swine. Of Cali, in turn, it is reported that “the Spaniards of that city raise large quantities of swine, sheep, goats, mares, and cows, and there are wonderful conditions for all that.” The swine were raised free range, pastured, in great herds that were led to the bottomland of the Cauca Valley so that they could feed on the pine nuts produced by the *burilico* (*Xylopia calophylla*) tree.



FIG. 5 Valette, *Fettered Pigs Near Popayán*, 1875–76

As it was not cost-effective to raise boars, just a few males were selected as sires, the most robust and hardiest stock, while the others were sacrificed between fifteen and twenty days after birth, to complement the fare of the forgotten banquet feast. Raising pigs was most popular, since it was within the reach of poor peasants, mulattos and freed slaves alike. Many eyewitness accounts exist in that regard. Quickly slaves and settlers learned to roast suckling pig in a simple fashion, as it was done in Castile. An old recipe, as presented by Dionisio Pérez, conveys the idea:

The animal is chosen between fifteen and twenty days of age. It is slaughtered and completely immersed in a cauldron of boiling water. Once it is nice and clean and white, cut open a channel the length of the belly, from the snout to the tail. Remove all entrails and wash again inside and out, wiping thoroughly with burlap. Stretch it out as if it were a tanned hide and run a barbecue spit along its entire length, while not allowing the cavity to close. With a swab moistened in brine, daub and moisten all over and expose it to a glowing charcoal fire, rotating continuously. With each turn, rub it with a slice of good bacon, and afterward moisten it with the brine until the skin blisters and takes on the color of a hazelnut. An hour and a half should suffice for the entire operation. Bacon is preferred to lard because the former softens as it cooks, while the latter makes the skin crunchy.²⁶

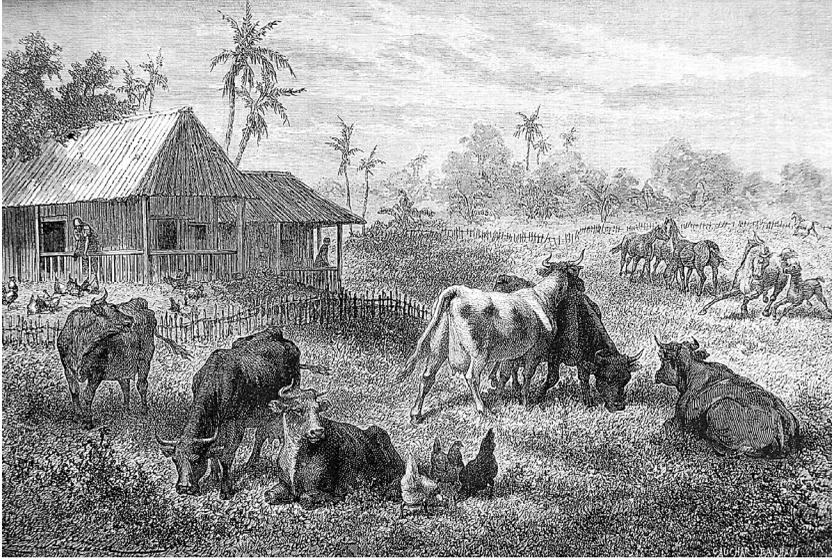


FIG. 6 Bayard, *A Farm in Tropical Climes*, 1869

This is traditional cuisine, simple and exquisite. This delicacy was consumed by the guests at the wedding banquet of Doña Inés de Lara, at the Cañasgordas Estate, as Eustaquio Palacios recounts in his novel *El alférez real* (The royal second lieutenant). The same applies as well to an enormous stuffed sow, among many other things, but Eugenio Barney Cabrera has already told that story in his indispensable essay on Cauca Valley cuisine.²⁷ Here we are interested in showing the abundance of traditional cooking, replete with long-lost subtleties. This roast suckling pig was not an aristocratic dish but rather one of common access to all, rich and poor, like the turtle soup and the fish and meat with fruits.

Something else was happening. The climate, the fertility of the soil in the bottomland of the tributaries and rivers, the variety of legumes and grasses, and the broad meadows and pastures of the valley brought about a breathtaking growth in the number of head of cattle. This was true to such a point that, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, there were already large landowners and livestock breeders the whole length of the Cauca Valley. On the visit of Manuel de Abastas and Francisco Javier Torijano in 1721, for example, it is reported how 1,000 cows grazed at the estate of Gregorio de Zúñiga in Dominguillo, just as at Francisco de Arboleda's in Quilachao, and another 1,200 in the Jesuit property of Japio.²⁸ The largest owner was Nicolás de Caicedo, with 17,000 head of cattle on Las Animas Estate between Cartago and Buga. But there were also others,

like Domingo Cobo, who had 8,565 head at Bugalagrande; Francisco Olano, with 4,000 at Los Chancos; and Salvador de Caicedo at the Cali commons with more than 3,000. Hundreds of proprietors owned more than 100 head, and large herds of maverick livestock grazed in the northern stretches of the valley and along other frontiers. According to John P. Hamilton, before the Wars of Independence, the Cauca River Valley supported a million head of cattle, and enormous cattle drives flooded the markets of Antioquia, Bogotá, Popayán, and even Quito, in Ecuador.

That explains the everyday abundant presence of meat, milk, and dairy products on the tables of Cauca Valley families. Meat would be prepared in a multitude of ways: fresh, salted, and sun-dried; salted and smoked; combined with fruits, as Hamilton tasted it; in a *sancocho*; shredded and conserved in *hogao*; barbecued with *pintones* (semiripe plantains); ground up and pickled; steamed with potatoes and yucca; smoked and then fried; oven-baked in a pastry or as meatballs; in a fricassee, “very tender and better than the way it is prepared in New York,” as Isaac Holton confirmed in 1852; in steaks Creole style and under fried eggs; not to mention liver, tongue, and brisket, tripe, beef hocks, shanks, tails with hot chili, stuffed turnovers, and yucca pastries; and in so many other forms that one could go on listing them forever.²⁹

In addition to the variety of preparations of beef—remember we also have fish, aquatic mammals, and pigs, plus others of which nothing has been said—there is milk, which enriches the valley’s cuisine in many ways. At daybreak in the corral, one would draw milk—ideally from a cow with a large calf—directly into a glass, in which grated unrefined brown sugar with lemon juice is mixed, to obtain *boruga*, a type of warm *kumis* that should be drunk immediately before the whey separates. Some milkmaids would add to the sweet-and-sour base a splash of *aguardiente*, and some landowners, a nip of brandy. It was a nice way to start the day.

Despite the fact that milk would be consumed at all meals, accompanying a mature roast—especially the foamy *postrera*, milked from cows near weaning and preserved in the cool of the stables—or beaten into chocolate, or mixed into dough for cakes, breads, and wraps, when not for *dulce de leche* and rice pudding, there was so much left over that it was necessary to save it in the form of butter and cheese, with as many cheese varieties produced as the climate allowed. Curds, *queso fresco*, cottage cheese, creamy cheese to spread—even a cream cheese made of colostrum milk was produced to serve to children—the stone cheese Isaacs mentions, an elastic cheese derived from cooking rennet in whey, and so on: it would go with *arepa* (corn muffin), wheat bread, a thousand fried dishes, conserves. It would be marinated with onions, garlic, black pepper, herbs, and other condiments; would go hand and glove with sweets; and would form the ideal combination in the simplest and most perfect dessert of

Cauca Valley cuisine: *queso fresco* in sugarcane syrup. It could not be otherwise, coming as it did from the land of livestock husbandry and sugarcane.³⁰

All this explains how one could concoct a meal that combined beef with fruit and ended with sweets and cheese, a practice that caught Mr. Hamilton's attention at El Bolo Estate. It wasn't really anything out of the ordinary, but rather everyday fare in the Cauca Valley, among the powerful as well as the humble. Isaacs, in *María* (1867), describes one of these everyday lunches: "To tell the truth, there were no great delicacies at the lunch, but it was known that Emigdio's mother and sisters knew how to present it: the soup made of aromatized *tortilla* with fresh herbs from the garden; fried plantains, shredded beef, and corn-flour buns; the excellent chocolate of the region; stone cheese, bread pudding, and water served in large antique pitchers."³¹

On another occasion also, in the novel, Efraín is served "white and purple masses of corn, green cheese, and roast beef," and, days later, he admires a mulatto woman "roasting half-cured cheese slivers, frying rolls, bringing *pandebono* rolls to a golden brown, and jelling preserves." As can be observed, meat, milk, and cheese go together readily. But other things do as well, and of these we must now speak.

Things from Hither and Yon

One would have to go back to 1540 and keep in mind the meal we have mentioned of corn, yucca, and fish, "of which there was much need." On that expedition the Spaniards also found "some food of tender corn, and melons of the earth, and pumpkin [*Cucurbita maxima*] and yuccas, and yams, which are good-tasting roots." They found honey in abundance everywhere. In Timaná, which formed part of Greater Cauca, they found wild peanuts, cultivated them, and mounted an industry of nougat candy made of honey and peanuts, which they traded in various parts of the region.³² They discovered wild vanilla, but neither they nor the indigenous knew how to exploit it (this they would later learn from the Aztecs, via the Spanish missionaries and conquistadors). Avocados accompanied them wherever they went, with special notoriety in the Cauca Valley. Cacao, which again neither outsider nor native knew how to consume, would also be spotted in these parts.³³ And they found fruits, in quantities and varieties that were truly alarming. Star apples, pineapples, coconuts, loquats, soursops, custard apples, passion fruits, quinces, hearts of palm, guavas, *guamas* (*Reynosia guama*, a very large bean), pomegranates, mulberries, cherries, and many more, "which for not knowing their names are not listed," it was charmingly said.³⁴

The Spaniards also brought their own provisions. Wheat grew well in Pasto, where there was a mill as early as 1542, to the point that "already in that city



FIG. 7
E. Riou, *Sugarcane Juice*,
1875–76

one does not eat corn bread, because of the abundance of wheat,” as Cieza de León wrote.³⁵ It also caught on around Popayán. In the Cauca Valley sugarcane found a privileged environment in which to prosper. Very soon, in 1548, Andrés Cobo and his brother were exporting sugar to Panama from their mills located in Amaime. The Spanish also brought fruits with them, especially citrus, which flourished in the region. Vineyards and olive groves were less common, for planting them was prohibited by the Crown, although clandestine plantations are recorded. And plantains and coconuts would play a major role.

In fact, by the start of the 1540s, as Cieza de León recounts, the bases for the cuisine of the mixed-race population were set in place:

In these valleys the Spaniards have their farms or ranches, along with their servants. . . . Alongside these farms run many beautiful channels, with which they irrigate their plantings. . . . There are many orange trees, limes, lemons,

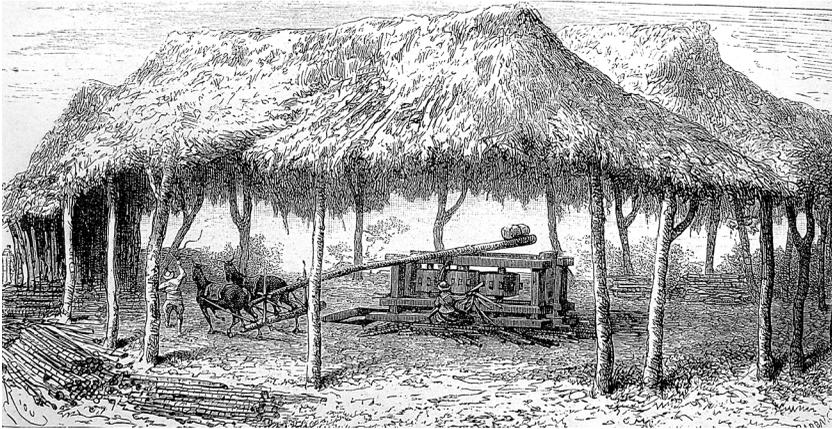


FIG. 8 E. Riou, *Sugarcane Grinder or Mill*, 1875–76

pomegranates, large plantations of banana trees, and even larger plantations of sugarcane. . . . There are pineapples, guavas and soursops, avocados, and some small grapes that have an external shell, which are very tasty . . . , quinces, plums . . . , melons from Spain and many vegetables from Spain as well as from this land. Up till now they have not planted wheat. . . . The city is located a league from the Main River, previously mentioned, abutting a small river of singular waters that spring from the mountains. . . . All the riverbanks are covered with fresh gardens, where there are always vegetables and fruits.³⁶

Rice would be planted in the environs of Jamundí and, initially, in the marshy lands of modern-day Guacarí.

More important still, they brought slaves from Africa. And the latter adapted easily to the climate of the warm valleys of Greater Cauca, to its rivers and its seaboard. By the end of the colonial period, their population thrived to the point of constituting a majority of the vast territory of the provincial government of Popayán. In the census of 1789, transcribed by Francisco de Silvestre, it is indicated that the provincial government had 64,463 inhabitants, among whom over 35,000 were black, 22,979 free and 12,241 slaves.³⁷ They were concentrated in the Cauca and Patía Valleys and along the Pacific coast. In these zones the black women became masters of the kitchen. They set themselves up around what, at a certain time, was disdainfully called a “black cookstove.” They also took charge of the language, of raising children—white and black—of music and dance, and sometimes of the ancestral home itself, leaving a deep imprint on the culture of the region.

That is the source of our fried dishes and, according to Eugenio Barney Cabrera, steamed cooking.³⁸ Slow cooking, often over a low flame, is more characteristically Spanish. These black women, who in general ran everything, including things culinary, created delicacies derived from plantain, rice, and sugarcane. All our dishes bear an African imprint, sometimes as appetizers and always as tasty side dishes: in the golden and translucent *tostadas* of green plantains and in the *marranitas* that Don Leonardo Tascón described with a certain scorn as “bland paste that the poor people make from roasted mashed green plantain, to which they add cracklings,” which he confused with the *sango* from Nariño, and which, of course, is based on plantains that are fried, not baked.³⁹ When they are done right, they are a truly irresistible gustatory treat. One finds the imprint in yucca pastries, also fried, filled with tangy meat stew; in empanadas made of corn dough filled with appetizing meat stew and potatoes, fried till they are golden brown; in *aborrajados*, crunchy on the outside and dripping with ripe banana syrup inside, in perfect combination with the flavor of fresh cheese; and in corn dumplings, golden and crunchy, which melt in one’s mouth.

This is so even in our tamales, which have little to do with the Aztec *tamalli*, except for the linguistic denomination, as also happens with the Cauca Valley *pipián* (a type of savory nonmeat filling for empanadas), which differs vastly from the Mexican version.⁴⁰ Although the tamales are made of corn and, sometimes, potato and chili peppers (both pre-Hispanic products), the black influence is found in the banana-leaf wrapper and, especially, in the long cooking in boiling water. Beside the tamale, which is common to several regions of the country with only slight variation, it is beef and pork that would become the fashion in the Cauca Valley, and only later would chicken be added. But the black cooks would produce the very delicate “glistening” variety, diminutive in size, made from batter that is white and soft, with a savory meat filling. The surprising *piangua*, a creation of the Pacific coast—in which coconut water instead of broth is used to thin the dough, and the oyster stew is in coconut cream and *hogao*—would make the difference and produce one of the most exquisite dishes of all Colombian cuisine. There would even be a variant that replaced corn in the dough with green plantain, with curious results.

In the wraps—especially the very delicate ones made with baby corn—most of the ingredients, and in this case the wrapper itself, are indigenous. In the Pacific zone, as usual, they would replace butter with coconut water, to smooth out the corn-flour batter, lending it a special flavor. In these wraps it is the cooking—the mode of preparation—that would bear an African stamp.

The same may be said of our sancocho, although its Hispanic ancestry is also undeniable. Much as the garlic, advancing toward the West, reveals the footprints of the armies of ancient Rome, meat and vegetable stew indicates the routes of the Spanish sailors and conquistadors. There would thus be Canary

Islands stew, Cuban stew, Puerto Rican stew, Mexican, Chilean, Peruvian, and so on, which would take the classic names of *puchero*, *cazuela*, and *sancocho* in Colombia, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, and so on.⁴¹ These stews are modifications of the old *olla podrida* (literally “rotten pot”) of Castile, according to the specific foods available in each locale and the people who prepare them. The Cauca Valley version would have its special flair and for a good while it would be made of fish, almost always bocachico, later to be replaced by beef, preferably corned or jerked, although sometimes one might use a cow tail or fresh needlefish. Plantain and yucca were indispensable, and one could add baby corncoobs, but never potato or other fillers. Of course, the special taste would depend on the precise combination, the delicate balance among onion, garlic, unsweetened *yerba mate*, and cilantro, which harkens back to the wise old black women cooks. Chicken was served only in exceptional circumstances, and even at that only among the powerful. In nineteenth-century Cali it was said, not without a sense of whimsy, that when a poor person ate a chicken, one or the other was sick.

The development of aviculture and the transformation of livestock ranches into sugarcane plantations contributed to the disappearance of the traditional *sancochos* with which the kitchen maids raised Cauca Valley inhabitants for four centuries, giving way to the lighter and somewhat insipid chicken soup, which is almost always made from a very young chick, fattened with steroids, exposed to artificial lighting twenty-four hours a day, and doped so that it never sleeps, its only concern being to eat.

And weren't these same matrons the ones who worked miracles with our innumerable fruits: juices, sorbets, jellies, guava paste, preserves, candy?⁴² The green and refreshing *luladas*, with the fruit chunked and the seeds left in, and the soursop-based *champús*, which, although known also among the black community of Cartagena, as Friar Juan de Santa Gertrudis tells it, survived only in the Cauca Valley.⁴³ They combined these fruits with fish, as we have seen, as well as with meats, although the details of those concoctions have been lost. And they were made invariably with cheese or other dairy products, for it should not be forgotten that many of those Africans came, just as did the Spanish, from societies dedicated to raising and grazing milk-producing livestock.

We have read of these mulatto women browning *pandebonos*, frying rolls, and kneading yucca bread. We would see them beating dulce de leche in large copper frying pans, preparing angel hair for Holy Week, candying limes and oranges, shaping corn muffins and the exquisite batter of tender corn. Even the *arepas* acquired a distinctive character, for the bakers would be sure to use high-quality cheese and to make them almost a meal in themselves. They would enrich their menus with multiple soups—too many to enumerate—and would invent a casserole of green beans and tender corn that should be more widely renowned than it is.⁴⁴ One of their culinary glories would be, however, rice. They

would prepare it in many ways, among which stand out the risotto-like *atollado*, which should have a creamy texture, and rice pudding, always thick, which can be sipped, hot or cold, and which goes well, if one is so inclined, with honey or blackberries in nectar, especially when it curdles just as you dig into it with a spoon.⁴⁵ But, above all, they would achieve perfection with white rice, which glistens, prepared so that it crunches between the teeth, even when completely cooked, with its grains separated in such a way that they can be counted one by one. When made with coconut, it is a culinary achievement that lends itself to a plethora of variants.

Of course, racial mixing alone was not enough. Even though the precise hybridization of Europeans with Africans, over a native bed of embers, has produced varied, exquisite, and singular cuisines, as happens with the Cajun and Creole cooking of the Mississippi Delta or the Bahian kitchen and that of certain parts of northeast Brazil, time and a diversity of raw materials were required, and no habitat is as amenable to such needs as the Cauca River Valley.

Our traditional cuisine arose as part of the new Creole (uniquely American, as opposed to peninsular Spanish) culture that took shape through a long process whose roots reach back to the period of Spanish domination. It is a sister of Creole literature, which begins to form in *El carnero* (The sheepskin), by Juan Rodríguez Freyle; of music, which achieves its most definitive form in the *bambuco viejo*; of a language that, emerging from a Latin source, branches off in many respects from the Spanish spoken on the Iberian Peninsula; and of the American visual arts, which achieved their most glorious heights in the great Quito School of the colonial period.⁴⁶ It is a new cuisine, unique to the Cauca River Valley for its significant Afro-descendant component, with strong ties to the cuisine of the Caribbean and of other Spanish American peoples where an African spirit simmered, over a low flame, along with traces of Andalusian, Moorish, pre-Hispanic, and Castilian cultures. It was, in its time, a new cuisine, a popular creation, responsible, here and in other parts of the continent, for what José Rafael Lovera called a “gastronomic Golden Age.”⁴⁷

Travelers in the nineteenth century refer to this cuisine as the art of “regional cooking” to indicate its singularity. It produced a smorgasbord in which were combined peanuts, green papaya, meats and fishes, chili peppers, coconut, rice, beans, spices, and hundreds of fruits and vegetables whose flavors and aromas we have forgotten. The arrival of modernity and the penchant among Latin American elites for imitating everything European—especially the French, in the case of cooking—have deprived us of this wealth, to which we must return, for this forgotten feast represents one of the most authentic aspects of our culture.

But this proposition, if left in the realm of the senses, has no force. Of course, there are those, where the senses and taste are concerned, who find sufficient justification for treating this aspect of our culture as something that

goes beyond its region of origin and refers, truly, to vast areas of Latin American culture. But that would be an exception to the rule and would run the risk of trivializing the theme or converting it into a mere question of recipes or culinary techniques. One must look to another level to find—beneath the charm of these gastronomic preparations—social relations, codes of communication, symbolism, and a complex fabric that underlies the peculiar formation of Creole communities.

The neoclassicist Andrés Bello, in a suggestive article titled “Las repúblicas hispanoamericanas: Autonomía cultural” (The Spanish American republics: Cultural autonomy), advanced the concept of continental unity in affirming that a “considerable number of nations situated on a vast continent and identical in institutions and origin . . . , customs and religion, will form over time a respectable *corpus*, one that counterbalances European politics.” And at that very point he signals the need to “know in depth the nature and needs of the people . . . , listen with attention and impartiality to the voice of experience,” and dedicate oneself “to observation” in order “to discover the inclinations, customs, and character” of the societies that constitute the apparently heterogeneous Latin American cultural universe. For Bello, understanding the cultural traits, the Latin American manner of being, that peculiar “nature,” was prior to any processes of political unity or forms of governance.⁴⁸

This essay, an inquiry into the alimentary habits of a region of Latin America, subscribes to that thesis. And since cooking, as an element of culture, at least where research is concerned, cannot rely on an elaborate specialized bibliography, it has been necessary to turn toward literature, particularly the great Latin American romantic novel *María*, a fruit of the same climes, in search of suggestions, indications, observations, and certainties that might permit us to unravel the hidden networks of culture through which we navigate. Although localized, these networks have a continental dimension that will help us to better understand our “inclinations, customs, and character.”⁴⁹