“They Started to Make Variants”

THE IMPACT OF NITZA VILLAPOL’S COOKBOOKS AND TELEVISION SHOWS ON CONTEMPORARY CUBAN COOKING

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Abstract

This article illustrates the ways communities maintain and adjust the boundaries of local cuisine as food systems change. Focusing on contemporary Cuban household cooking practices, I reveal the importance of cookbooks and television in helping household cooks adjust to food system changes. Through her cookbooks and television show, Nitza Villapol, a famous Cuban chef, played a significant role in demonstrating how to cook with a drastically restricted set of ingredients during and after the economic crisis of the 1990s. Her work aided Cubans in making adaptations without completely changing the local cuisine. This article outlines the scope of Villapol’s work, the relationship between her work and the Cuban state, and how Cubans remember her role in the 1990s and use her work today. I argue that Nitza Villapol’s work was crucial in helping Cuban household cooks learn to use available ingredients to create dishes that call for now scarce ingredients.

Keywords: Cuba, Nitza Villapol, food systems, consumption, provisioning, cookbooks, celebrity chefs, food scarcity

Introduction

As globalization and development lead to shifts in global patterns of commodity circulation, local communities must often adjust their food consumption practices in order to maintain or modify their traditional cuisine. As the available and affordable ingredients shift, it is often necessary either to eliminate certain dishes from the local cuisine, or make changes in the preparation of those dishes. In this article I reveal the significance of cookbooks and television shows in this transition, and underscore the ways in which cooking-related media can serve as a political
project that encourages citizens to adapt and accept sociopolitical change. To illustrate these two points, I use ethnographic data from Santiago de Cuba to analyze the role of Cuban chef Nitza Villapol’s popular cookbooks and television programs in helping Cuban household cooks adjust to transformations in the national food system. For my research participants in Santiago de Cuba, the local cuisine is comprised of various dishes that they conceptualize as having been traditionally consumed in Cuba in general (e.g., rice and beans, slow-roasted pork, or fried plantains), and dishes that are thought to be local traditions in Santiago and the other eastern provinces of Cuba (e.g., hallacas, a local dish similar to tamales, and ajiaco or caldoza stews made with locally-grown ingredients). 1

Following the collapse of their major trade partner, the Soviet Union, the Cuban food system² changed significantly. This paper explores how household cooks drew from Villapol’s resources during this period to learn how to use available ingredients to create dishes that call for ingredients that became impossible to procure or too expensive to purchase regularly. Following Appadurai (1988), I argue that cookbooks can be viewed as an archive of culinary culture and, more specifically, that they can illuminate changes in accepted food consumption practices and culinary ideologies. I address how communities maintain and adjust their ways of eating and the boundaries of their local cuisine, a cultural signifier based on the manner of preparing food particular to a region or social group, when their food system changes. Although much of the existing literature on cookbooks and cooking television shows discusses the ways in which traditional culinary practices are lost through development and globalization, I argue that through her cookbooks and cooking show, Nitza Villapol helped household cooks maintain Cuban cuisine, despite a changed food system, via innovative cooking practices with new ingredients.

Cookbooks have had very specific roles in shaping local cuisine in this shifting food landscape. Under the changing Cuban food system, Villapol’s cookbooks and television show have helped Cuban cooks to undertake their own projects of post-colonial nation building through cooking. Many of my research participants believe that for a dish to be considered an authentic local Cuban or Santiaguero dish, it must be prepared in the “traditional” manner that is locally defined with specific ingredients that have historically been readily available in the region. Such ideals of local and traditional cuisine align with Appadurai’s conclusions that cookbooks can sometimes be part of a discourse of “nostalgia and loss” (Appadurai 1988: 18). I therefore frame this article within the historical and cultural contexts from which these works emerge in order to understand better the contemporary relations people have with their cuisine, which indeed can be characterized as nostalgic.

Cookbooks and cooking shows are not only aids for household cooks as food systems transition, but such cooking-related media can serve as a political project that encourages citizens to adapt and accept sociopolitical change. Several food scholars have linked food production and consumption with efforts to define and mobilize nationalism and national identity (Derby 1998; Wilk 1999, 2006). The promotion of particular dishes has been linked to nationalism in various contexts. For instance, Wilk (2006) links the promotion of rice and beans to Belizean national
heritage, while Schacht (2013) argues that for the Makushi of Guyana, the consumption of cassava is connected to their struggles to stay alive and maintain their cultural identity despite hundreds of years of colonialism and post-colonial global capitalist forces that could have easily lead them to change their cuisine and in turn their way of life. Much of this literature states that cooking and cuisine help to strengthen national identity as globalization destabilizes many aspects of local culture (cf. Ray 2008). However, these works rarely show an explicit mechanism, other than the volition of individuals, which works to maintain this link between cuisine and nationalism in the face of change. As I show in this article, Villapol’s work, directly and explicitly helped Cuban families learn new skills for maintaining their traditional ways of eating as their food system changed and the ingredients they were accustomed to using to disappeared from the shelves. Thus, I demonstrate the ways in which cooking-related media, such as cookbooks and cooking shows, can serve as a mechanism to maintain or strengthen local identity as many aspects of everyday life change under globalization.

Looking at the Cuban context in particular, Christine Folch’s work reveals the ways in which cookbooks operate at the juncture of political economic structures and individual agency. Indeed, as Folch (2008) illustrates, cookbooks are manuals that direct human behavior in certain ways. However, as the Cuban case shows, cookbooks serve as more than just manuals, and their users have the agency to adapt and adjust recipes as they see fit and as their situation permits. That is, the recipe does not have to take a singular or static form; rather, it is malleable and can evolve as situations change. Contrary to Finn’s (2011) notion that there can only be one perfect recipe for a dish, the data explored in this article reveal that the definition of a dish can be broadened so that modifications of recipes and innovations in the kitchen can still lend themselves to the making of a particular dish.

As I show in this article, Villapol’s legacy stands in opposition to Finn’s thesis that the relationship between the perfect recipe and the reader is a political one, where “authority to make certain choices and decisions for oneself” are relinquished (Finn 2011: 510). Rather, Villapol’s work inspired household cooks to take on new challenges and innovate new ways of cooking local dishes. She showed how they could use other resources to maintain their way of eating, what I have called elsewhere “essentialized fare” (Garth 2013a). I argue here that a recipe does not have to take a singular form, it does not have to be timeless or perfect, and individual agency does not have to be relinquished. Villapol’s work provides something quite different from the perfect recipe; it provides the tools with which to innovate cooking as food systems change.

Villapol’s project was still political, however. In socialist Cuba, published recipes and official cooks represent and convey one ultimate authority: that of the state. Nonetheless, her work was very political in that she adjusted her cooking instruction to what was available under the post-Soviet socialist provisioning system. She explicitly supported the revolution, stating in 1991: “I believe this damn revolution is right, despite all our problems” (quoted in Santiago 1998:1). Villapol’s cookbooks and television show helped to mitigate the potential breakdown between the
individual and household goals to maintain a decent quality of life and the Cuban state’s goals to rework the socialist provisioning system in a way that was feasible without Soviet aid. Although some research participants view this as a negative attribute of Villapol’s work, the fact that so many Cubans did and still do turn to Villapol’s recipes attests to her success.

This article uses interview data with household cooks in Santiago de Cuba to show that Nitza Villapol played a major role in helping Cubans to transition to a new food system after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I reveal the ways in which household members used Nitza Villapol’s cookbooks and referenced her work and television shows. Under a situation where the foods and ingredients that they were accustomed to became scarce (Garth 2009), Villapol’s books and television shows guided Cubans to cook with slightly different ingredients and resources to create dishes similar to what they were accustomed to eating. After detailing the life and work of Nitza Villapol, I analyze interview excerpts from people living in Santiago de Cuba that include detailed descriptions of Villapol’s role in their lives. I detail my own observations of the current uses of Villapol’s work in two different households in Santiago de Cuba. I draw upon these data to show how Villapol’s cookbooks and television shows illuminate my argument about their central role in connecting and transforming the national symbolism of cuisine to the daily struggle for a decent meal in Santiago de Cuba.

The Life and Times of Nitza Villapol

Nitza Villapol has been an icon of Cuban cooking since the early 1950s. After Vilma Espín (1930–2007), the late wife of the current Cuban president, Raúl Castro, and the head of the Cuban Women’s Federation, Nitza Villapol is said to be the most well-known woman in Cuba (Miller 1992). She was born in 1923 in New York to Cuban immigrants. Her father, a devoted communist and supporter of the 1917 revolution, named her after a Russian river, the Nitsa, a tributary of the Tura (Ponte 2012). When she was nine years old, she moved with her family to Cuba (Santiago 1998). Villapol graduated from La Escuela del Hogar in 1940, and received her doctorate in pedagogy from the University of Havana in 1948. In the early 1940s, Villapol studied nutrition at the University of London. In 1955, she attended a course offered through Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) on recipe writing and collecting (Ponte 2012). After her schooling abroad, Villapol returned to Cuba and hosted the cooking show Cocina Al Minuto for 44 years with her assistant, Margot Bacallao. Before her television show, Villapol had a radio show in Cuba (Miller 1992). Her television show, filmed in Havana, is the longest-airing program in the history of Cuban television, and was broadcast during both periods of abundance and periods of economic hardship.

As Marisela Fleites-Lear (2012) outlines, Villapol was among the foremost women to usher in the dual transformations of the Cuban woman and the Cuban kitchen as part of the socialist revolution of 1959. Villapol’s post-revolutionary role was to “educate people and get women to see the work of the kitchen not just as something routine, but as an activity on which the health of the people depends” (Mujeres 1969: 96 quoted in Fleites-Lear 2012: 245).
During Villapol’s lifetime, there were two major overhauls of the Cuban food system: the first, in 1962, was the establishment of the food ration, and the second, in the mid-1990s, began when the collapse of the Soviet Union sparked the slow dissolution of the ration. In the decades after the 1959 revolution, the Cuban government increasingly relied on Soviet material aid to maintain Cuba’s food rationing system, which had been in place nationally since 1962. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba entered into a period of economic hardship known as the “Special Period in Time of Peace.” During this period, Cubans barely maintained access to basic foods; luxury and nonessential goods that were available in abundance in the 1980s were nearly impossible to find. From 1990 to 1995, “caloric intake fell by 27 percent” (Dominguez 2005:14). The basic provisions available in the food ration were reduced from one month’s supply to about ten days’ supply only (Mesa-Lago 2005). As food subsidies decreased, the prices of the little food available in state markets increased and wages decreased. Purchasing power rapidly declined, and many Cubans plummeted from middle to lower class. To complicate matters further, a dual currency system was established in 1993 when the government began to allow Cubans to use foreign currency legally. Cuba operated on a dual US dollar–Cuban peso economy until 2004 when dollars ceased to be accepted and the convertible Cuban peso (CUC) came into circulation. Under this situation, “12 percent of urban Cubans earned less than 100 pesos per month (less than $5 per month at the prevailing exchange rate), had no access to dollars, grew no food and received no food subsidies” (Dominguez 2005: 15).

By the Special Period, Villapol was already a Cuban icon; her books, show, and Villapol herself already stood as an index of Cuban cuisine in general. Villapol’s recipes and influence have also been significant among the Cuban diaspora, particularly among Cuban Americans, since the early 1960s (cf. Fleites-Lear 2012). She is mentioned in Cuban American novels, which portray the diaspora’s nostalgia for foods from “home” and for dishes that have since been lost. Her cookbooks include, *Sabor a Cuba* (*The Flavor of Cuba*) and *El arte de la cocina cubana* (*The Art of Cuban Cuisine*) and *Cocina al minuto* (*Cooking in Minutes*). *Cocina al minuto* (*Cooking in Minutes*), the book that shares the same name as her famous show, is the cookbook for which she is most famous.

During the Special Period, Villapol used her television show to demonstrate modified recipes that used the few ingredients that were available in Cuba. Based on my ethnographic data, one of the most important things that Villapol did achieve was to teach Cubans to adapt their favorite dishes during this period. When meat was scarce, she taught them how to substitute vegetables like eggplant marinated in the same spices. She worked around the missing milk, eggs and spices that were traditionally called for in Cuban dishes. In 1991, she reflected that:

> The first thing I think about is, “What does the Cuban homemaker have and what can be done with it?” We’re not starving here … If you have good food habits, you can have a balanced diet in Cuba. Food habits [in Cuba] are geared toward a society, an economy, that no longer exists. (Santiago 2008: 1)
She was aware that the ideal of Cuban cooking was based on a food system that dissolved after the 1990s and her work ushered the Cuban cook back into the kitchen to make Cuban dishes in new ways.

Although Villapol died in Havana in 1998, aged seventy-four, her work still lives on. I argue here that her work did change the way Cubans cook, though probably not in the same way that she hoped (through reducing meat and sugar intake). Through her television show and cookbooks, Villapol taught Cuban readers and viewers many tricks in the kitchen and home, including seasonal eating and cooking practices, but one of her most important and unique contributions was teaching how to cope with Cuba’s changing food system. She was there for them through the introduction of the rations, through the years of abundance during the height of Soviet material aid to Cuba, and through the drastic shortages of the 1990s. Her work is still used indirectly in the homes of my research participants as they cope with more changes in the food system today.

Aside from this basic biographical information and despite her widespread impact, there is very little scholarly work on Nitza Villapol (however, see Fleites-Lear 2012). In this small body of literature, a travel account by Tom Miller (1992) includes a long description of an afternoon he spent with Villapol in mid-1990. Although Miller had some difficulty drawing her out at first, he eventually led her to divulge more about herself, including some personal reflections on her life’s work. Villapol told him that she had eaten “canned clam chowder” for lunch that day—something she felt was an abomination for a Cuban chef. She voiced concern about the Cuban diet:

Cubans ruin their eating. I don’t give a damn. All they want is pork, fried bananas, and rice. You don’t need meat to be well fed. What the hell do I care about rice? [sic] Wheat is as good for you as rice. I won’t stand in line for any food. (Villapol quoted in Miller 1992:131)

Miller describes her as speaking with anger:

People won’t change their food habits. They eat what they like, not for their health. It’s very frustrating. I used to think I could change their eating habits. Now I give them information, and if they don’t change it’s their tough luck. They’re too finicky about what they eat. (Villapol quoted in Miller 1992:131)

Beginning to cry as she reflected on her life, she added: “People have stolen my works. I haven’t received a penny for my books” (Villapol quoted in Miller 1992:131). Returning to the subject of her work and the Cuban diet, Villapol explained:

I’ve tried for thirty years to change the Cuban diet. Cuba has a sweet tooth. Every country does, I suppose. Sugar is a baby taste, and people who have babies can help them by not feeding them sweets all the time. Sugar has a place in the human diet, of course. But people use it to replace other nutrients. (Villapol quoted in Miller 1992:133)
Explaining that she used very little sugar in her diet on account of her diabetes, Villapol also confessed her desire to lose weight, as being slim was in style throughout the world. She added that obesity had already become a problem in Cuba by the 1990s.

Villapol was motivated to improve how Cubans eat; she specifically wanted the Cuban diet to be more healthy and incorporate fresh fruits and vegetables. Her comments to Miller clearly show how she felt her work towards this goal was unsuccessful; indeed, her words have a bitter tone. Compounding her frustration with this unmet goal, her lamentation that she was never sufficiently paid for her work implies that monetary compensation might have made compensated for her inability to achieve her personal goals. Her day with Miller reveals that at this period, late in her life, she was feeling very isolated and unappreciated.

Villapol’s work was critical in politicizing women during the Cuban revolution (Fleites-Lear 2012). In comparing the pre-revolutionary edition of Villapol’s most popular text, Cocinca Al Minuto from 1956, and the post-revolutionary version of 1980, Fleites-Lear (2012) shows the ways in which Villapol’s work successfully transforms the household cook (usually a woman) into the “new revolutionary cook,” who fights against the US embargo by innovating culinary solutions to the resulting food scarcities. Even after the early years of the revolution, contemporary uses of Villapol’s corpus have transformed with the food system. Just as Villapol’s work was critical in politicizing the household cook during the 1959 socialist revolution, during the Special Period of the 1990s her work played a crucial role in placating any forms of protest or complaint that may have arisen as a result of rampant food shortages. By demonstrating modifications of traditional recipes and showing useful ingredient substitutions during this time of scarcity, Villapol ushered household cooks into a new era of innovation and dealing with ongoing scarcity.

**Cookbooks and Cooking Shows Connect Food and National Identity**

Michael Pollan (2009) reflects on the ways in which cooking television shows have changed household cooking practices in the United States. He points out that Julia Child and her cooking show, *The French Chef*, which began in 1963, changed his childhood by “improving” the culture of food in his home and in America in general. *The French Chef* is not unlike *Cocina Al Minuto*: as Child is to Americans, Villapol is to Cubans both a figure of nostalgia and folklore and a “contemporary hero” (Pollan 2009). Both chefs introduced their audiences to a different way of cooking and guided them through the process of transforming their culinary practices. While Child has been followed by an entire generation of celebrity chefs in the United States, what is arguably different about Villapol is that even after her death she remains one of few celebrity chefs in Cuba, and her recipes and shows are still widely used for everyday cooking, though in new and different ways in the contemporary Cuban household. Another distinction was that unlike Child’s work, Nitza Villapol’s culinary pedagogy was directly tied to the Cuban state, specifically its project to transform the way that Cubans cooked during a period of economic hardship in the 1990s. Both Villapol and Child were pivotal in changing household
cooking practices in their respective countries. Whereas Child adjusted American cooking by introducing French-influenced cooking and adapting it to American middle class lifestyles, Villapol helped Cubans to cook traditional Cuban dishes as the setting of everyday Cuban life shifted.

Villapol’s legacy remains strongly linked to Cuban national identity. Over the course of her long career, the types of recipes included in Villapol’s cookbooks and television shows changed as the political context of Cuba changed. Fleites-Lear (2012) details the ways in which Villapol transformed her cookbooks from the pre-revolutionary recipes that uncritically used ingredients and brands from the United States, to the post-revolutionary versions that shamed the use of “Yankee” ingredients and lauded the Soviets. Over the course of her career, Villapol transitioned from a more capitalist oriented approach to her work to a fully socialist approach, not only with respect to the types of products that she featured, but also with her practices of underscoring the importance of household labor for national politics. By teaching cooks to adjust recipes in order to continue cooking Cuban cuisine, Nítzia Villapol’s cooking show and cookbooks served to maintain the link between Cuban identity and Cuban cuisine.

Much of the food literature has shown how cooking and cuisine help to strengthen national identity as globalization destabilizes many aspects of local culture (cf. Ray 2008). What the literature fails to show, however, is an explicit mechanism, other than the volition of individuals, that works to maintain this link between cuisine and nationalism in the face of change. As I show here, Villapol’s work, directly and explicitly helped Cuban families learn new skills for maintaining their traditional ways of eating as their food system changed and the ingredients they were accustomed to using disappeared from the shelves.

Methods

The data for this article were collected during sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Cuba, as part of a project on household food acquisition and consumption in the city of Santiago de Cuba. Specific methods included systematic observation of household food acquisition and consumption practices, behavioral observations and time allocations for these practices, and semi-structured interviews among twenty-two households, with a total of 107 household members. In each household, I began by spending approximately one week conducting general observation of the household, allowing me to become familiar with household dynamics and identify significant routine practices and activities. I took extensive handwritten fieldnotes on the household observations. I used the initial findings to develop an observation protocol and in the subsequent weeks conduct systematic observations focused on household food acquisition practices, intra-household dynamics and inter-household interactions surrounding food. I continued to add new practices to the protocol as I observed them. After gaining rapport with each household, I used semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth interviews based on a short interview protocol designed to elicit basic information on household food acquisition. Semi-structured interviewing allowed me to keep the participants focused on topics related to food while still allowing me to ask further questions.
about things that were mentioned in the interview that were particular to that household or were not foreseen in my interview protocol. I usually conducted a minimum of two interview sessions with each consenting household member. The first was used to elicit basic household demographics and general processes of food acquisition. The second and third (if necessary) interviews covered more specific detail about household members’ experiences of the food system, including strategies for coping with scarcity, their problems or difficulties with the food system, and their hopes for future changes in Cuba.

Cooking with Nitza Villapol in Today’s Cuban Kitchen

In this section I delve further into Villapol’s influence by using data from Santiago families to demonstrate the ways in which her work is used in household cooking practices in the 2000s and 2010s.

Jorge Chino (JC), a middle-aged mulatto-identified man who lives in a suburb of Santiago de Cuba, is an exceptional case of a working husband who does a lot of the cooking in his household. His wife also works and they divide the household cooking duties relatively evenly. Without fail, if he gets home from work before his wife he makes dinner for the family. One such afternoon I observed as JC made a meal of Cuban style meat loaf, tostones, yellow rice and salad. On this particular day he acquired some low-quality beef and ground it to make meat loaf (carne prensada), adding some pork to the beef before grinding them together. He stuffed the meat into an old can, and placed the can in boiling water to cook the meat loaf. While it was cooking, he started talking about the kinds of foods he thought that foreigners preferred and those that Cubans like. He concluded that, “a Cuban just could not eat a plate of lettuce for lunch, we need meat, something substantial, real food…” JC validated Villapol’s observations that Cubans felt meat was always necessary for a proper meal. I told him that I had observed many Cuban meals thus far and that I had indeed observed what he had said—most meals were meat, rice, beans and viandas (tubers such as cassava or yuca, as well as plantains and squash), but I had not yet seen anyone make ground meat in a can. Where did he learn this?

He told me that he had learned to cook from his mother, who was an excellent cook. She taught all of her children to cook—two girls and two boys—as she felt that cooking was a life skill that everyone should have. He continued telling me that he loved cooking so much because it was “una arte de inventar” (an art of invention) and he loved to take new ingredients and make them into unique dishes—which was something that his mother did not do—she had her repertoire and did not really stray from it. He said that although now he just “invented” dishes on his own, it was Nitza Villapol’s television program and her book Cocina Al Minuto that first taught him to “inventar” in the kitchen. He took out a stack of tattered pages that are all that remain of his copy of Cocina Al Minuto. He started flipping through the pages and found Villapol’s recipe for carne prensada. He put it in front of me and explained that when he first got married he would cook only occasionally. For example, on Sundays he might cook the meat dish. This changed when his wife got really sick and could not cook. He took over the cooking for the
family, and it was Villapol’s book that got him through. This was in the early 1990s when ingredients were very scarce (cf. Garth 2009). He spoke at length about how difficult life was for most Cubans then, but noted that his job at a local store was what saved his family. It was during this time that he says he really learned how to cook, how to “invent” in the kitchen. Things had improved since then: cooking had become easier and easier until it became fun for him to take some new ingredient and “make art” with it.

Like JC, Mariladis, a middle-aged white Santiaguera living in the city center, also learned to cook with new ingredients through Nitza Villapol’s cookbooks. One afternoon in the summer of 2010, Mariladis invited me over to look at her recipes. I had wanted her to participate fully in my household-based study, but she did not feel comfortable with it for many reasons, one being that she did not feel she was a good cook. She explained that she used to have a cycle of about seven dishes that she made on a regular basis, and then a handful of special occasion dishes, but after the Special Period, when things started to disappear, she could no longer find the ingredients to make her dishes. She said she remembered feeling like, “No hay comida! No Hay Comida!” (There is no food! There is no food!), but it was really just that she had “to open up her mind to try new foods”:

It was that ability that I got through Nitza Villapol; she made me open up my mind to more possibilities. So instead of going to the market and seeing that there was no chicken, no pork, no fish, I would see what there was, which was pigs’ feet, livers, ground meat, and I wouldn’t be afraid to take it home and invent something with it. Nitza did that for us.

Mariladis not only uses the “art of inventing” to make dishes out of what is available, but she also painstakingly adapts baking recipes to what is available, testing them again and again until she gets it right. She then writes down her own adaptations for things like cake with no eggs, cake with no baking powder, bread without yeast, etc. Over the years she has slowly collected an arsenal of recipes so that she can always make some version of what she wants, no matter what is missing. Although innovation in the kitchen was always possible and likely to have been practiced throughout history, Mariladis credits Nitza Villapol with teaching her that this was even possible, and with giving her the confidence that she needed to be able to carry out these modified recipes.

**Remembering Nitza Villapol**

To build on our understanding of the role of recipes, cookbooks, and those who write them, in this section I use responses to my explicit questions about people’s memories of Nitza Villapol to show how my study participants have used Villapol’s work in the past and continue to do so today. The three memories of Nitza Villapol presented here are representative of how people remember Villapol in my larger sample of research participants. The narratives come from men and women living in Santiago who come from distinct class and racial backgrounds. The first passage presented here is a co-constructed narrative through which a local Santiago de
Cuba couple respond to my question “Do you remember Nitza Villapol?” Mercedes is a white middle class sixty-five year-old woman, and Sebastian is a seventy-year-old middle class black man. Both of them have lived in Santiago de Cuba all of their lives:

[Author]: Do you remember Nitza Villapol?
Mercedes: Oh yeeessss! What a good woman! [Sebastián] Do you remember?
Sebastián: She died. She wrote really well, and taught about the production of foods, and she liked to cook with a lot of vegetables, lots of greens [leafy greens]. But it is through [because of] the leeks—Leeks are delicious. I am not much of a leek lover, but I have come to like leeks, so that I don't have to buy natural garlic, [or] onion, if one buys it, but it is not because—but natural vegetables have the best flavor that there is.

Mercedes begins with an empathic “Yeeessss!” followed by a positive reflection on Villapol, “what a good woman,” indicating that she has fond memories of Villapol. Sebastian focuses on the fact that she cooked with “a lot of leafy greens,” revealing that he associates Villapol with her work in attempting to integrate vegetables into the Cuban diet. Both Sebastian and Mercedes have fond memories of Villapol, reflecting on her as a good woman, famous for her efforts to integrate vegetables into Cuban cooking, and to make the Cuban diet healthier. They view her efforts positively as improving the Cuban diet.

In a second example, Carlos, a forty-five year-old black man from Santiago, and Myra, a thirty-eight year-old black woman from an upper class neighborhood in Santiago co-construct a narrative memory of Nitza Villapol:

She was a person that, well, really spoke a lot about Cuban cooking. She was a magician, uh huh, but there were things that were lacking ingredients that weren’t here and so on, and she started to simplify these recipes in a way that changed the Cuban dish. So, well, they started to make variants, like instead of making mayonnaise—one can make it with potato—so, then, already this is not mayonnaise, that is something else... .

As I asked how one might make mayonnaise with a potato, his wife, Myra, walked in the room and responded:

Myra: Take the potatoes and cut them into pieces, boil them with salt. When they are soft put them in the blender with a whole egg and beat it and then you just add a bit of oil and it’s like mayonnaise and you don’t have to use too much oil.

Carlos: Yes, in other words, variants, she—that is what she did. She made strange dishes, now I don’t remember, but they were things that the people didn’t normally eat.
His wife cut him off and with a huge smile exclaimed, “Are you talking about Nitza Villapol?” and she laughed out loud, adding “Yes, she taught us to adapt when there was nothing.” She corrected herself, “Well, with what there was.”

Carlos reflects on Villapol as “simplifying” recipes so that people could continue to cook when ingredients were “lacking.” It is important that he notes that Villapol changed the “Cuban dish,” and that the dishes she was cooking were variants on the “real” original dishes. He suggests that her version of mayonnaise was not really mayonnaise. Overall, he seems to have a balanced and neutral tone toward Villapol and her work, noting that while she helped people learn to cook in new ways when it was necessary to do so, she also changed original dishes and made foods that were “something else” and things that people “didn’t normally eat.”

Myra: She started using a lot of vegetable protein, soy—things that Cubans were not accustomed to.

Carlos: Things that Cubans weren’t accustomed to. She opened a window of possibility to the people, that their tastes might—it’s not that [what we do eat] had better nutrition, but its what we were accustomed to eating … She opened up the option to a distinct diet for us.

Here Carlos notes that although Villapol did not do what they were accustomed to, she gave Cuban cooks more options. Like Sebastian, Carlos and Myra reference Villapol’s role in integrating vegetables and specifically soy protein into the Cuban diet, which Villapol did both due to the scarcity of meat after the 1990s and because of her own motivations to make Cuban food more healthy. Carlos and Myra reflect on the ways in which Villapol taught Cubans to integrate foods, like soy, that were new to the Cuban food system after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Like many other Santiagoeros, these two couples’ reflections on Villapol tend to take positive or neutral stances towards Villapol’s role in changing Cuban food during times of scarcity. The following example is representative of a minority view that Villapol’s work was negative and harmful for Cubans and Cuban cuisine. In his narrative, Eduardo Milan, an eighty-three year-old black Santiagoero from a poor economic background, talks about Villapol and her work to his twenty-three year old grandson, Yandel, and me:

Yandel: Above all Cubans have to adapt to eating vegetables because they aren’t eaten, before Cubans didn’t eat vegetables, but through the revolution they are teaching how to do it … and on the television they are putting—teaching how to do things—Nitza Villapol.

Eduardo: Yes, she did many typical dishes, and also foreign ones. [She had] a way of elaborating [the use of] different ingredients, and international dishes too…

Yandel: Eggplant steak, uh like this eggplant steak, these things, yes.

Eduardo: I told [Yandel] about these things, it was like, “Look an eggplant steak—how I have tricked him” and he [Yandel] said [hypothetically]
“This is not a steak! It’s an eggplant, a slice of eggplant that they make breaded, there like that [it’s] breaded.” Eggplant is not steak.

Eduardo continued to explain that because of Nitza Villapol’s influence on changing Cuban cuisine, he felt that he had to teach his grandson what “real” Cuban food was like. He wanted Yandel to understand what “real” food was, in case he ever leaves Cuba. He said:

If he orders a steak in [New York] and when he gets beef he sends it back asking for eggplant, it would be a tragedy, but if I don’t tell him that steaks are supposed to be beef, he might never know.

Eduardo views Villapol’s integration of vegetables into Cuban cuisine as trickery. He specifically sees the substitution of vegetables for meat as fraudulent, and not “real.” He feels that it would be tragic if vegetables were to become so integrated into Cuban cuisine that younger generations no longer knew what the dishes were originally supposed to contain (e.g. meat). Like Eduardo, many people agree that these modified recipes were not authentic; some view this as negative while others see this as either necessary or an improvement upon previous versions of traditional Cuban cuisine. For Eduardo and those who agree with his stance, Villapol’s work to adjust Cuban cooking becomes a political project and moral position in which Cuban cooks accept and use the new food system, thus forcing them to accept political changes with which they may not agree.

The Legacy of Nitza Villapol and the Art of Cuban Cooking

Over the past fifty years, the Cuban food system has gone through many radical changes. As I have argued elsewhere (Garth 2009, 2013a, 2013b), these changes in the food system do not appear to have changed the local conceptualization of Cuban national cuisine, nor changed what most families actually eat every day. The reason for this stability of national cuisine lies in the motivation and work of Cuban individuals, who slowly shifted their practices of food acquisition and preparation to adapt to the new food system. Nitza Villapol’s teachings were crucial in aiding this transition. The majority of my research participants, regardless of race, class, or gender, reflect on Villapol as someone who not only made significant changes to Cuban cooking through her cookbooks and television show, but also helped to open up Cuban cuisine to new possibilities by teaching home cooks to integrate new ingredients into their cooking as new ingredients became available in the local food system and things that were previously common became scarce. Research participants credit Villapol’s legacy as providing the confidence that they needed to feel comfortable innovating in the kitchen.

Across race, class and gender, the legacy of Nitza Villapol is a vibrant contribution to the contemporary “art of inventing” in the kitchen, an art that grew out of problems of food scarcity in the 1990s. The narratives of Mariladis and Jorge Chino illustrate a key point of my argument—in their view, Nitza Villapol’s work taught them a skill that they could continue to apply as their food system undergoes more
changes. They have moved beyond simply following her cooking instructions via recipes and her shows, to employ the skills of using what ingredients are available to create a decent meal that is still considered to be “Cuban cuisine.” These local uses of and responses to the cookbooks and television shows of Cuban chef, Nitza Villapol, illuminate the ways in which communities maintain and adjust their ways of eating and the boundaries of their local cuisine when their food system changes.

While the majority reflected on this positively, some Santiagueros have more cynical views on what Villapol did. Like Eduardo, they see her work as “trickery.” They see the changes she introduced as diluting or ruining Cuban cooking. Some also see her as advocating for and aiding the changes made to the food system by the Cuban government. Those that do not like or agree with these changes may see Villapol as part of the downfall of Cuban cuisine. In Cuba, consumers view the paternal state as responsible for providing the foods and other goods that they need. When the state did not fulfill these needs, people became angry. Rather than protesting the scarcity of food items, Villapol encouraged acceptance and adaptation. Therefore, some Cubans assumed that she sided with the Cuban state and not with the citizens. They viewed her adaptive cooking techniques as tactics and tricks to try to get Cubans to accept a different and lower standard of living. Those who hold these views reflect on Villapol and her legacy negatively. They see Villapol as aiding in a process of eliminating the “real” and true Cuban cuisine that they deserve to consume, and tricking people into eating substandard foods.

Although some Santiagueros have bitter views towards Villapol, my data show that as people reflected on her role in the 1990s, most people demonstrated neutral or positive feelings about how she helped people adapt to the changing food system. Under a situation where the foods and ingredients to which they were accustomed became scarce, Villapol’s books and television show helped guide Cubans to cook similar dishes to what they were used to with slightly different ingredients and resources. While many households still have her books in their homes, few people reference these cookbooks directly while cooking today. Instead, I argue that Villapol’s show and books provided Cubans with the skill set necessary to “inventar” (invent) good meals with “lo que aparece” (whatever appears). My research participants often remarked that they used Villapol’s books to “get ideas” for dishes, or to think through how to adapt a dish for which they were missing an ingredient. For many Cuban cooks, the direct application of her recipes is no longer feasible as ingredients and kitchens have changed. However, many cooks credit Villapol with helping them acquire the skill of adjusting their cooking practices to Cuba’s changing food system, and therefore, most people remember her graciously. They also are less likely to use her cookbooks because the items that are scarce now have shifted since those books were written/published. Nevertheless Villapol’s work has had a pivotal role in helping to keep food on the table and maintain household cooking practices in post-Soviet Cuba.

Conclusions
This article builds our understandings of recipes as political and moral projects. In the case of Nitza Villapol, her work is directly tied to the Cuban food system as it
underwent changes with political regimes (the 1959 Cuban revolution) and international relations (the fall of the Soviet Union). The recipe serves as a political message to accept policies and state systems by adjusting household cooking practices. This is also tied into a discourse of nostalgia and loss voiced in the data discussed here and by Villapol herself. Though she aided in changing the way that Cubans prepare food, she lamented the loss of certain elements of food culture and eschewed Cuban dietary patterns as unhealthy, frustrating and needing change. Villapol’s own sentiments are imbued with certain ideals linking cuisine and social hierarchy; part of her project was also the moral goal of making Cubans eat in a manner that she considered more healthy and more sophisticated than the traditional Cuban diet. Additionally, Villapol’s affiliation with the socialist government led some Cubans to think that her recipe modifications and work to help Cubans adapt their recipes was a way of convincing people to accept the problems with the state and change their way of life rather than protesting the changing (failing) food system and demanding that the state provide foods in the same quantity and quality that it had guaranteed before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Whereas much of the literature on cookbooks has viewed them as a documentation of shifting food consumption practices after the fact, this article shows that cookbooks and cooking shows can also lead to changes in accepted food consumption and preparation practices. In contrast to Finni’s characterization of the perfect recipe as authoritative, the narratives I have outlined here involve cooks who do not “cook from blind obedience without thinking” (Finn 2011) but rather use Villapol’s work as a foundation for what they call the “art of inventar” in the kitchen. Instead of forcing her audience to relinquish all creative capacity, Villapol’s work, her recipes and television shows have had the opposite effect, opening up the possibility of new ways of cooking and creating in the kitchen.

To conclude, I return to my initial question regarding how communities maintain and adjust their ways of eating and the boundaries of their local cuisine when their food system changes. This article clarifies the role of cookbooks and television programming in processes of transition as food systems change. As processes of globalization intensify and the proliferation of food media continues to grow, cookbooks and cooking television shows become important sites through which to evaluate changes in culinary culture and food consumption patterns. Cooking media are both an archival record of changing practices and a vehicle through which culinary innovation may be disseminated to broader publics. Individuals may use cookbooks and cooking shows to evaluate their social and political position relative to the types of master narratives that are reinscribed in these forms of media.

Nitza Villapol’s cookbooks and television show have been extremely important in helping Cuban household cooks adjust cooking practices under Cuba’s changing food system. As foods became scarce or too expensive for most families, Cuban cooks were faced with the decision either to stop cooking dishes they had previously enjoyed or to adapt those dishes to the new situation. Villapol’s work taught Cuban household cooks to adjust recipes so that they could still cook many of these dishes. Although innovation was always possible and indeed necessary to continue cooking
during food shortages, Villapol’s work gave household cooks a sense of confidence and a resource to draw upon for their continuing practices of culinary innovation. The work of Nitza Villapol was pivotal to how people in Santiago de Cuba adjusted to food shortages and changes in the food system. Furthermore, the influence of Villapol’s work is still a critical part of the way Cubans cook today. Villapol’s recipes and cooking shows helped open up Cuban cooks to the possibility of creativity, change, and the elaboration of their previous culinary repertoires. Although some view these changes as problematic and as an acceptance of an inadequate food system, most Santiagueros view Villapol and her work as helpful in carrying cooks through this transition.

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Notes
1 Under colonialism, Cuban cuisine was deeply influenced by Spanish tastes, and the plantation economy dependent upon chattel slavery fostered a significant impact of African foodways in colonial Cuba. Cuban cuisine continues to be a mixture of Spanish, African and other culinary influences; however, although the underlying influences remain in place, the Cuban food system changed drastically after the 1959 socialist revolution. Under the socialist food system, cuisine was nationalized and homogenized. The food rationing system left little possibility for regional and ethnic variation.
2 I use the term “food system” to denote the progression from field to fork, that is, the process following food production through processing, packaging, exportation, movement across the globe, importation, domestic sale, household food acquisition, preparation and, finally, consumption.
3 Previous to 1993, the possession of hard currency was a punishable crime.
4 Villapol is a cultural icon in the popular sense. She and her work are readily recognized
among Cubans. Villapol is also “indexical” (I use the term “index” in the Peircean, semiotic sense). Villapol “indexes” Cuban cuisine, in that she as a person is directly connected to Cuban cuisine because her work related to Cuban cuisine has such a dominant position in the Cuban food world (cf. Peirce 1992).

In my study, I allowed subjects to self-define their race and class. I also recorded how their official government identification classified their race. In addition to subjects’ self-identified class, I collected dynamic data on household assets and economic possibilities to determine household socioeconomic status (SES). In general, subjects’ own classification of race and class corresponded to my own findings.

All of the names in this article are pseudonyms.

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