

Gathering Our Voice

Interview with: Mikael Hernandez

Date: June 17, 2011

Interview by: Nancy Warner

Videographer: Dominick Bonny

Transcript by: Deborah Lyon-Acker

Date: June 28, 2011

NW: And so I'm going to start the interview. My name is Nancy Warner and I'm here with Mikael Hernandez and Dominick Bonny is our videographer for the day and we're doing an interview with Mikael for the Foodways and Byways project for Gathering Our Voice and the date, as we just discussed is June 17, 2011, which will be significant 50 years from now when you listen to this interview again.

So as I said, I'd like to ask you some of the same questions that we talked about before so that it's all in one interview. So could you tell me how long you and your family have lived in North Central Washington?

MH: Um, I've lived here my entire life but I know my dad has been here, um, since he was 9 so...I can do the math, he was born in 1968 and so that's like...77? Around there.

NW: Yeah.

MH: So he's been here since then in this area and, um, and it's good, it's a good thing that he's here because a lot of his family is here. And then my mom has been here since I think, I'm thinking like a couple years before I was born? "Cuz she moved from Panama, so...yeah.

NW: So what part of Mexico did your dad and his family come from when they moved here?

MH: Michocan. In Mexico - central Mexico.

NW: And what was it that brought them here?

MH: Um...I'm not entirely sure, but from what I heard was my grandpa had already been coming to the U.S. for work and he would leave my grandma with the kids in Mexico and finally they just decided to bring everybody across. And that's what they did and I think this was just for work and better living conditions, I'm guessing.

NW: Okay...alright. So did your grandparents then work in agriculture or what did...

MH: Yeah. Um, picking fruit I'm guessing. And I've also heard that my grandpa had a lot of other jobs as well, but, yeah, mostly fruit.

NW: So have they always, I know your grandparents live down the road and I look forward to meeting them.

MH: My grandpa lives down the road. My grandparents separated a long time ago.

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NW: Oh! Okay so your grandpa lives down the road. Has he lived there, in that space a long time?

MH: Oh no, he moved in there like 5 years ago.

NW: Oh, okay. So when he first moved here where did the family live?

MH: Um, South Wenatchee on Lewis Street, um, 500 Lewis Street.

NW: Okay, and so did your grandfather have a garden there?

MH: I think so. He may have had something small, it's not, it wasn't a very big lot and the house took up a lot of it, so...

NW: Yeah, that's what I was thinking. I was thinking if you had a garden that would pretty much be your yard.

MH: Yeah.

NW: Yeah, well...so what is there about North Central Washington, since you've been here your whole life, and as we talked about before you're about to go to Italy, which is really exciting and, talk about a major change of pace... When you meet someone new, and you're gonna be meeting a lot of new people in Italy, if they asked you what it is about your home that you're most proud of, what would you say?

MH: Um, well, it would probably be the more general things, like "Oh, I'm from Washington State, and Washington is up here in the corner of the US and we have apples and we have Boeing and Microsoft in this area. You know, I wouldn't actually focus on Wenatchee because I don't think Italian people would understand or you know would like recognize Wenatchee, but um, if I were to go like more specific, I like, I really like how, um, open, it kind of is. I mean, there are a lot of opportunities. It feels like if you wanted to do something, then you could go ahead and do it. Like, um, we have so many things nearby, like if you want to mountain bike, you can mountain bike, if you want to rock climb, you can rock climb, if you have a certain hobby you can do it without having to sacrifice something else. And, I don't know, I always felt like it wasn't very difficult to do what you wanted here.

NW: Hmm. That's a good thing to be proud of. Hmm, yeah. So it's a place where you can sort of pursue possibilities?

MH: Yeah.

NW: So you're planning to come back here?

MH: Um, I think so. Uh, I don't know if I'll end up living here when I'm older, but I would like to come back.

NW: Okay, well, let's talk a little bit more about food then. You talked in an earlier interview about how you learned to garden a little bit with your grandfather. I wonder if you could tell us a bit more about, about how that garden functioned in the community. Your grandfather's garden, the experiences you had helping him?

MH: Um, well I would just help him watering and then sometimes he would have me weed and the main part where I had to help him was when we had to tear it down, like rip it apart so that that way the, it was ready for next year. And so as far as the functioning in the community, he invited a lot of people to come get fruit, I mean get vegetables from his garden, 'cuz he would grow a lot of things. And, um, I think it was mostly family, but I think it was also family friends. It was always like (pepinos) and cucumbers and like stuff like that. We'd always want to see, "Oh, is there any more pepinos, is there still pepinos, is there still radishes, is there still tomatoes that we can come get, you know." You know, because sometimes you'd come and there wouldn't be anything left. And, um, I think it was good that my grandpa shared like that. It kinda, I don't know, (chuckles) my stomach's grumbling, but it kind of brought us, I don't really know what, um. It just drew people in, I guess. Yeah, I don't really know how to explain it.

NW: Well if he had excess cucumbers or something, then he would kind of get the word out to a network of people, friends and family?

MH: Well, he would tell us, "Oh, you should come by, we have pepinos right now" or, that's usually what would happen, he would say that he had something and we would come and then either there was a bunch of them or people had come before and had taken most of them and we were like, "Oh, maybe you should have told us earlier" or something (chuckles). But it was kind of like that.

NW: So did he grow, does he grow things in his garden that remind him of his home in Mexico?

MH: Yes, he actually, he, um, a lot of Hispanic people do this even when they don't have a garden, um, they will buy the small cactus plants, novalles, that's what we call them. And you grow them in like a pot, and then because they need warm temperature, they're usually grown inside, my grandpa has built like a little greenhouse, just a small thing like 5x5 or 6 feet, and he's got his novalles in there. Yeah and so, um, I'm guessing it's like a traditional food like coming from Mexico because, um, they, they eat it, but they also use it like, you can somehow get some sort of liquid from it and, yeah.

NW: How do you eat it?

MH: You, well, we...my dad has fixed it a couple times. Um, what you do is you cut off one of the leaves and you cut it into strips, and you, I'm not entirely sure if you peel it or not because it's got a kind of leathery texture, but it's kind of gooey inside. Um, soft but um, you cut it into strips and then you can fry it with egg, or, I don't know, I think you can boil it, or make it into a soup, too.

NW: And then you can obviously take the spines off when you peel it.

MH: Oh! These cactuses really don't have needles.

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NW: Oh.

MH: They're really weird, they grow like hands, that's what they look like. Like they have um, it's not like the cactuses you think of like with all the spines everywhere, like with a little flower on top. It's not really like that, it's more just like a green bunch of hands that like, grow upon each other and it's that kind of a thickness, like almost like, I just lost it...

NW: May have to visit your grandfather's place and see what you're talkin' about. That sounds interesting and if that's something that, that's kind of a tradition that people bring from Mexico, that would be neat to share that with people. So what other um, traditional foods have you learned about from your grandparents, we did talk a little bit about that last time.

MH: Well, just recently, um, for my graduation party, um, my mom learned how to make (biria) which is like a lot of meat in like a red sauce and she cooked it with potatoes and, um, that's kind of a traditional Mexican thing I think, 'cuz (biria) is like what you'd eat at large gatherings because you can make a lot of it at once. And ours was beef, but you can also have (biria) of like goat, I think, I don't know if you can have it of pork. But you can have it of goat, and so that's also, um, a traditional one. (Birria de chevo)

NW: So we talked before about your grandparents teaching you about preparing some foods for large family gatherings. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the importance of traditional foods in family gatherings in general, besides your graduation, as you've grown up?

MH: Yeah, um, like a lot of the things that, um, we eat when we have large gatherings like, we'd have rice or beans and tortillas, and um, that's kind of like the most common, 'cuz then you could like eat that with whatever else you want. And so, I learned how to make tortillas, and I've learned how to um, smash beans (chuckles) and I actually learned how to cook rice from my mom. But um, yeah, I think those are the three main parts of the meal, I mean not the main parts but like the staples and then, um, you know, everybody always says. "carne asada" but that's just grilled beef. But um, ah, I don't really know if there's a genuine like Mexican style of cooking. I think it's just the way we put the foods together and how we enjoy eating spicy foods with lots of flavor. Um, yeah, just, I think, a lot of the food is just, you know, is just food (chuckles) and so I don't think it's much different than what other people might cook.

I remember, I went on a camping trip with my friend and he was, like, "We're having skinny steaks." And I was like, "What are skinny steaks?" And then he showed me like this meat and I said, "No, that's carne asada." And, "No, we call them skinny steaks." The same thing (chuckles). And I was like, "Okay" but, yeah, it's not like it's that much different.

NW: But there are unique aspects to the cuisine. The heritage that you brought with you...

MH: Oh, yeah, yeah

NW: With you and you've been talking about some of that and, um... You know one of the things that we're interested in with this project is basically bringing forth skills that older people have that can help younger people be successful as they go on. And so last time you told me that your grandpa, or your grandmother has taught you how to kill a chicken. And there are an awful

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lot of young people who don't know how to kill a chicken, so I think that you're well on your way to being able to take care of yourself. So why do you think that might be important to pass on traditions and practices. Why would that be important to you as you...

MH: So you don't forget them? Um, a lot of the time if you're not educated, because that's how it is in Mexico, there's not many educated people. Sure, there's teachers and stuff but my grandparents only had like, an elementary school education and um, you know, so that means that you can't, maybe you can't keep a written record of things, or you don't, you know, maybe you don't read everything, ur, you know what I mean? You kind of have a barrier there, and so a lot of it has to be from words and actions and stuff and so I think learning how to do those things from the older generation is kind of a way of not, of keeping what they learned and what they do from disappearing, because, I mean there isn't any other way they can tell people.

NW: And what is there about that information that you value? Why is it important?

MH: Um, I think you need perspective, because a lot of people just think, "Oh, this is the way it's done." And just take things for granted and you find out how much harder it was before when you hear the accounts from your grandparents and what they had to do and what happened during their time and um, its kind of humbling. And it gives you new respect for older people.

NW: Does it also sometimes give you ideas, when you learn about how things have been done in the past?

MH: Uh, sometimes. I can't really think of anything.

NW: Yeah, I guess I was thinking of something specific. Is there something specific about something you've learned from your grandparents or through your own mom and dad that they've, um, that's come down through their families that you just think is really important?

MH: Um, I think it would be learning how to make tortillas. Because it's something that I always thought would be pretty cool to know how to do, and I've learned how to do it, so I feel like I'm ready for college now, 'cuz I, I can make tortillas (chuckles).

NW: So why is it hard to make tortillas?

MH: Well, it's not that hard, it's just that you kinda have to have a good um, system or...yeah...like a good um, routine when you do it, because you um, you have to have the masa and then, you know, depending on how you mix the masa, the dough, it'll like make more, it'll make drier or more sticky tortillas, so you kinda have to have a good medium there, and then there's skill in peeling the tortilla off the little plastic sheet on the tortilla press. 'Cuz if you mess up then you rip the tortilla then you have a ripped tortilla that you can warm up, but you can't hold anything in it really, yeah...and then you...I'm not able to do it really quickly, but I've seen my aunt do it and she does it pretty fast, like she slaps 'em on there pretty quickly and then you have them cooked, 'cuz when you, after they're done and they're ready you put them on the griddle so they get a little more texture and they get, not thicker, 'cuz they don't really rise, um, they just get stronger, or, I think you understand what I mean.

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NW: Drier?

MH: Yeah, and then they don't fall apart, and then you put them in a pile and you can just store them and you bring 'em out again when you want to heat them up again and then you eat them. Homemade tortillas always taste way better than the ones you buy in the store.

NW: Okay, so your family's always made you own tortillas?

MH: Well, my grandparents always have. My dad buys them, that's what we usually do just 'cuz we can buy a lot of them.

NW: Yeah, they're pretty affordable, and they're good.

MH: Yeah.

NW: From the Food Pavillion, anyway. Um, well there's a lot more I want to ask you about... What are some of your favorite foods from our region?

MH: From Wenatchee?

NW: Yeah from the region, I mean, tortillas are a wonderful tradition and I understand that you like those. But are there things that are from here that you like?

MH: Um, I'm not really exactly sure what you mean, because really, what foods are from Wenatchee?

NW: Um, well...

MH: I haven't really heard of foods that originated from here.

NW: Well, it would be sort of wild foods perhaps, you know, things that you would hunt. Huckleberries or gathering, might be one example, the whole tradition around apples, orcharding, um...

MH: I like apples (both laugh). I like a lot of fruit, so...

NW: Okay, well, we're just trying to distinguish what people eat here and what they bring in from outside the area. So what's your favorite food from outside the area?

MH: Italian food (chuckles).

NW: Oh, really? All right, okay. Well let's talk a little bit about, um, you've been talking about sharing dinners together, family dinners where you'd gather together like your graduation where you'd have traditional foods, um, and then helping your grandfather with your garden. We talked about tortilla making and so it's sort of a food preparation process that's shared among people.

MH: Yeah.

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NW: Um, are there other things that your family's engaged in, in terms of sharing food preparation? Tamale-making parties or anything?

MH: Um, well every once in awhile when the occasion strikes us like usually a birthday party or if there's a person visiting who hasn't visited in awhile, you know, something like that, then the family will get together and would be like, "We're gonna make tamales this weekend or this night," "and then tomorrow we'll have a dinner, you know, something like that. And so I know that a lot of the family will engage in that when that happens, you know, because tamale-making is kind of a big endeavor (chuckles) because it is a little bit difficult and they make a lot of them. And so, I don't, I haven't really gone to them because usually the women? I'm not trying to be, you know, stereotypical, but like usually my aunts and my grandma and my great grandma, and like they'll gather at like my aunts houses and they'll just make 'em. And then I enjoy them the next day (chuckles).

NW: Sounds like a deal (chuckles). But you learned how to make tortillas...is that unusual for a guy to learn how to make tortillas?

MH: I don't think so, I think that's kind of like a "bachelor" food thing (chuckles). My grandpa makes tortillas, so...

NW: Okay. He's a good role model.

MH: Yeah, yeah.

NW: Okay, hmm. So is there a kind of food that you would call your "comfort food?"

MH: Um, no. I like all foods (chuckles). I don't think I'm really comforted by any food in general.

NW: So if you couldn't get say masa, would that be a problem for you?

MH: No. Well, I've gotten used to eating um, American foods, too. I'm not stuck in just what like Mexican traditional foods is/are. So I wouldn't have any problem like giving up Mexican food for awhile, but I probably would miss it for a little while and I would want to try it again. I mean, I don't see myself not eating Mexican food. It's sort of like, "Oh, we're gonna have tamales today or we're gonna have (mesoles) today."

NW: Yeah, it's a different time than like in the 40's, people living here didn't have access to masa and so they couldn't have tamales and tortillas and it just seems like it would have been really hard to not have access to those foods that...yeah. Um, well did I ask you what you may have learned from your grandfather when you were working in the garden, and about how to prepare the land for next year's planting. You were talking about how you helped him tear down the garden. Did you learn some things about caring for the soil that you think are important?

MH: Um, well whenever we, usually what happened is the garden would dry up, when it was done being used, then we might tear down a couple things like, um, like corn stalks, so that after

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the winter, like the next spring we would go in and we would start hoeing and ripping up the last couple things and, um, turning the soil, and um, I'm not really sure what the scientific process is, but I'm guessing that there were probably some nutrients that the soil gets from the dead stuff that's above it and then us just going through and mixing it all together helps it. So having done that and everything, when you put the rows of vegetables in and you let them grow and water them.

NW: Did he have, does he have particular patterns in the way he plants his plants, does he always plant marigolds by tomatoes or anything like that? Companion planting?

MH: Um, I'm not really sure, I think it just kinda depends on what he does have...I don't know, maybe the location depends on how close it is to other things, 'cuz I've noticed that for the past couple years he's been planting the squash and pepinos, I don't know, so he'll just sort of plant those things together, they're both kind of vines, I guess. He also plants them sort of in the corner, so that they're like the last ones to get watered if you water them down the row and I don't know if there's like a ...a reason for that maybe that's the way he sets it up, I don't know. And then he'll have the corn in this general area, its not like intermingled with everything else and the tomatoes. And the tomatoes are difficult to take care of because you gotta make sure they don't grow out, you want them to sort of grow up. So you can find the tomatoes easier and you take like wire and you lift the vines...and um...

(Phone rings...Soft voices)

NW: So let me ask you this...well, I was thinking about the gardening, does he, does your grandfather in preparing the soil and the laying out of the garden, just your experience in working with him over the years, would you, if you were someplace completely different with your own garden, would you feel confident doing that?

MH: I think so, um, I would plant a lot of the same things that he plants, I think. I would plant pepinos, tomatoes, carrots and maybe potatoes. He tried them last year with kind of mixed results, some grew better than others. But um, yeah, I think I would, I think I know enough to take care of them, correctly and not completely mess it up. I mean he, when the plants start getting bugs and stuff he'll go out and have like bug killing powder that he puts over them, over the leaves and um, you know, he fertilizes them, waters them like three times a day.

NW: Really?

MH: Yeah, I'm thinking in the morning and then around noonish and also in the afternoon.

NW: When it's really hot.

MH: Yeah.

NW: Yeah, he probably has a really productive garden. You know, I'd love to meet him and see his garden. Well that's good, so you know how to make tortillas and you could do a garden if you need to. So how does that make you feel? 'Cuz you must know other people, other students that might not have the skills and, and...so how does that make you...

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MH: Um, it kind of gives you a sense of accomplishment, because like, it's not just in knowing how to make tortillas and how to make a garden. I don't know if it's because of the family or if it's because I'm the older brother, so I have more responsibility like, I also do the laundry in the house and so you know you hear from people who like, you know, like they don't even know how to operate a washing machine (chuckles). So you go, "Oh, that's counterproductive...how are you gonna use one when you go to college." So, I don't know, it feels kind of cool to know those things but then there's always other people who know more than you and then you're like, "Oh, I should probably learn how to do that as well."

NW: Well, so back to food, I think that this might be my last question, and Dominick might have something to ask. When you think about the food we grow and eat locally whether it's for your grandfather's garden or the farmer's market what's your hope for the future about that?

MH: Well, um, I think the farmer's market is a great thing that we're doing here, because we, it's been kind of small here for awhile but it seems that it has been beginning to grow in the last couple of years. And , you know there's the whole, um, purchasing of that building downtown to create an indoor farmer's market. And I think that's a good idea, 'cuz we've travelled to um, Olympia and they have a huge farmer's market that's all indoors and there's just a lot of things that they sell. And so, um, I think that's a good next step and hopefully that could kinda make it go year round I think. And maybe also more... 'cuz there's a lot of food and vegetables right now and so having it indoors, you might have more arts and crafts now in certain seasons. So I think that's good, because, you know when people find out about the farmer's market, I'm pretty sure they'll like it. It's not like you can't like it, it's, you know it's helping Wenatchee and it's like local people that you've seen before and um, it's a good community thing.

NW: So one more take on local food, tell me, what...if you have a choice, why would you buy something that's locally produced by someone you know versus something that might be less expensive from someone you don't know. What's...why would you buy the local food?

MH: Um, well, with fruit, honestly, like in the farmer's market, everything there is pretty fresh. You know it's grown...it was grown you know, that season and it was picked like a week earlier and they're bringing it there to sell it there. And you know they just picked this kind of thing. You go to the supermarket and they're gonna have things that have been in the store for like the past year and usually you know, you can, they have those bags of apples that you can buy at Safeway, but like most of the time like three of them would be bad, and so you're paying for something that's not as good quality, and sometimes the farmer's market is more expensive, but I've noticed that it really isn't (chuckles) 'cuz you can buy a bag of like 10 apples for like five dollars, around there and like they're bigger apples than you buy at the store and they're better quality, and it's just like, "Well, why wouldn't you want to buy things from the farmer's market?"

NW: And then you worked at the farmer's market, wasn't it like to help your aunt again this summer?

MH: Um, I might I'm not sure because she hasn't really contacted me, um, so I don't know if she's gonna have as much of a, a stall there this year. She's been pretty busy, but um, yeah, if she does want me to come, then okay.

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NW: Okay, and what's your aunt's name again? I met her.

MH: Yeah, Marcie.

NW: Yeah. Marcie. That was it. And so do you have anything you want to add on this topic? I'm looking to see if there are any follow up questions, but is there anything you want to say to this topic, something that's floating around in your mind that might be um, important in terms of sharing something about your family's traditions, your heritage, why self-reliance is so important, you know to take care of yourself...feed yourself.

MH: Um, I think it all just kind of stems from how in Mexico there wasn't much of a...well, it was all kind of self-reliant. What you have to do is like take care of yourself and then people will bring that here, and they don't necessarily have to do as much of it as they need to anymore because there's not so many things to worry about here. And so that is... they're self-reliance is expressed in their, you know, the way they grow things or sell things, and look for bargains and stuff. And so it's a good thing, I mean, being self-reliant is a good thing to learn and um, I think it's kind of a, um, good quality. A successful quality of you know, Mexican immigrants and like being hard working and everything, yeah.

NW: Okay, good. Thank you.

DB: I don't really have too many questions, I mean how would you describe the way that you eat with your family, say with your brothers and your parents versus with a larger group?

MH: Um, like when we eat with a big family gathering, we usually have more than one table, or kind of like there'll be a big table for the adults, and a little one for the kids (chuckles). And I guess that's kind of normal, 'cuz that's what I've heard other people do but um, my mom is really big on eating dinner together as a family. Sometimes we don't share breakfast together and we don't share lunch together because usually I'm in school and they're at work but like, dinner she's really big about like "Wait 'till Daddy gets home" you know, "We'll eat when Daddy gets home or, um, if I'm out somewhere like its "You need to come home to eat dinner" and so she's, that's something that she's made an important point about. And it's probably something I'm gonna make an important point, too, because eating dinner with the family is kind of a good like, I don't know, it doesn't really end the day, but it's like ending the day kind of thing and it's like "Well, I'm with my family and I'm enjoying food so it's kind of a, we're sharing this moment. And you don't really necessarily need to talk that much if you just eat (both chuckle).

DB: How are some ways, or do the ways and the food that you and your family eat change over the course of the year, like do you eat more food from the farmer's market in the summertime?

MH: Um, yes, but that could just be because the farmer's market isn't year round. If it was year round, we might, we'd probably go there like every 2 weeks or something. But like, yeah, during the summer we do go sometimes once a week, and you know, we'll buy more apples, we'll buy corn; the corn is really good. Oh, that's one thing in Washington, or I'm guessing in this area of the US, but I've heard that our corn is really juicy and sweeter than corn you can get anywhere else and that they like usually have to add like sugar to corn to make it sweeter in other places.

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And so I guess I'm grateful for that, 'cuz that means I've grown up with good corn (chuckles) but um, yeah. I kind of got off topic but, yeah we would go to the farmer's market more often. And our diets don't really change that much, because we, I mean, we still buy the same things when we go to the grocery store. It's just now we substitute the better stuff from the farmer's market into what we usually got from the grocery store, and it works out pretty well.

DB: Ah, do you guys shop at fruit stands?

MH: Um, sometimes. My mom is pretty good at buying fruit like every week so, I mean it's like we see a watermelon vendor so we're like "Oh, we don't have a watermelon at home, so lets get some watermelon." It's usually not to bring more of the same thing home, its usually like if we're trying to find some variety.

DB: Oh, yeah, my last question, um, so you said your family is originally from (Midgpa)?

MH: My dad, yeah.

DB: Yeah, so how are some, or are there differences between the different states in Mexico, like let's say, Chihuahua, Jalisco. Are there differences in the cuisine, say between you and your friends, who maybe your friends parents are maybe from a different part of Mexico originally, is there differences still in cuisine, or has there become some more homogenized?

MH: Um, I think it has kind of homogenized just because they, like all the people from Mexico has all been grouped as all the people from Mexico. And so we had a lot of people from Michocan in this area, and so they maybe dominate in a way maybe and so I don't think it's been customary that the foods from that region are maybe more dominant but I'm pretty sure that someone from Oaxaca with different tastes, they could find what they're looking for, um, I really don't know if there's much of a difference in the cooking and stuff. It might just depend on like geography like how close they are to other countries. I don't, I'm not really sure where all these states are located in Mexico, but you know Mexico borders, what is it? Guatemala and Guatemala has different cuisine, you know, their influences, and so I imagine that someone from that area border may have some of the Guatemalan cooking or traditional foods incorporated into what they eat as well.

DB: Uh, that's pretty much all I came up with.

NW: Okay, well, thank you, we'll close this down and get you a copy of the interviews.