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# Partaking in Culinary Heritage at Yaxunah, Yucatán during the 2017 Noma Mexico Pop-Up

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**Abstract:** In spring of 2017, celebrity chef René Redzepi opened a pop-up of his famed restaurant, Noma, on the coast of the Yucatán Peninsula. During its run, Noma Mexico worked closely with the town of Yaxunah, a Yucatec-Mayan speaking community in the peninsula's interior, hiring women to make tortillas and acquiring local ingredients for the restaurant. For us—two archaeologists interested in past and present Maya food and agriculture who have worked in the Yaxunah community for years—this made the 2017 field season a compelling time to engage in culinary heritage. We share on-the-ground perspectives from our work with Yaxunah community members during a decisive spring for rural Yucatán's globalizing food system. These perspectives offer a candid contribution to this special issue's archive of community-based and heritage-engaged archaeological work in the Maya area.

**Keywords:** culinary heritage; celebrity chefs; foodways; tourism; Yaxunah; Maya archaeology

## 1. Introduction

For seven weeks in the spring of 2017, the Danish chef René Redzepi—whose Copenhagen restaurant Noma is revered in some gastronomic circles as the best in the world—opened a pop-up in Tulum, on the eastern coast of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula. To dine at Noma Mexico was to partake in “the most enviable meal of the year” (according to Esquire food critic Kevin Sintumuang)—no, “the meal of a lifetime” (said Jacob Richler of *The Toronto Star*). In the breathless reviews from Noma Mexico's brief existence, amid praise of the palm trees and culinary reveries of kelp oil, banana ceviche, and grasshoppers, four women come up again and again (Figure 1).

“The best table may be No. 23,” Tom Sietsema, the reviewer for *The Washington Post*, tells us, “parked front and center amid the greenery and with a view of the kitchen that captures the four local women whose sole job is making tortillas.” The *GQ* reviewer, Joshua David Stein, notices them, too: “At the very heart of the restaurant, on the steps of the kitchen, four women in traditional dresses from the Yaxunah community in the Yucatán handmake tortillas during the day as well as through dinner service.” Even Pete Wells of the *New York Times*, whose essay on Noma Mexico went viral for calling reviews of “a pop-up that sold out months ago . . . spectacularly useless”, nods to the tortilla-makers in his non-review: “Directly in front of the kitchen, four women from a nearby Mayan village make tortillas.”

These women—as well as maize, eggs, vegetables, and herbs—came to Noma Mexico from the Yucatec Mayan-speaking community of Yaxunah, two-and-a-half hours' drive inland from Tulum. We know these women, have called some of them friends, through our work as anthropological archaeologists based in Yaxunah. For many years, we have sought to understand the agriculture and foodways of past Maya communities through archaeological investigations at sites in Yaxunah's

landholding (ejido). Personal friendships and conversations with members of Yaxunah are a fundamental part of how we have come to approach these topics. Our work in cultural heritage—and especially culinary heritage—with the Yaxunah community is integral to this research. For this Special Issue of *Heritage*, we decided to share our experiences participating in culinary heritage work at Yaxunah in the 2017 field season, during and after Noma Mexico’s run. Yaxunah holds status as a prominent gastronomical origin place thanks to the attention and clout of the celebrity chefs, critics, and “foodies” whose voices dictate much of the global discourse on culinary heritage. While perhaps unique to Yaxunah in its particulars, that status is symptomatic of the larger forces of globalization and neoliberalization currently impacting the food systems of hundreds of other Maya-speaking communities across the Yucatán Peninsula, and Indigenous communities around the world.



**Figure 1.** Yaxunah women preparing tortillas at Noma Mexico. Photograph courtesy of Anders Husa and used with permission. Accessible at <https://andershusa.com/noma-mexico-tulum-popup-rene-redzepi-taco-tortilla-jungle-restaurant/>.

To explore this further, we will contextualize the spring of 2017 in the historical entanglements of local and non-local stakeholders in Yaxunah’s culinary heritage. We follow that context with a frank look at our experiences participating in culinary heritage production with the Yaxunah community during that eventful period. Our focus on culinary heritage is indebted to the work of anthropologists who have explored the political and cultural dynamics of Mexican and Yucatecan food, and we hope our work may advance their efforts [1–4].

We seek, too, to play a part in advancing archaeology’s potential contribution to the larger discourse around globalizing food systems and food sovereignty. Celebrity chefs, for all their skill and knowledge and artistry, owe their celebrity to capitalism. They are products of the same system that has, for centuries, eroded Indigenous food sovereignty and dismantled traditional agricultural knowledge systems worldwide. Our objective in this paper is to bring attention to the arrival and presence of celebrity chefs and gastronomical tourism in communities like Yaxunah, to show that these encounters do not happen in a vacuum but rather are entrenched in histories of neoliberalism and so-called sustainable development. We as archaeologists (with our field’s own capitalist and colonial baggage) studying past food and agriculture have a responsibility to confront and engage with these histories as they unfold. We acknowledge these broader goals informing our ongoing work. Here, though, we want to draw attention specifically towards the ground-level dynamics of culinary heritage in Yaxunah and our participation in those dynamics as archaeologists. We offer these narratives candidly, as a contribution to this special issue’s archive of on-the-ground insights into 21st-century archaeologists’ engagement with communities and heritage in the Maya area.

## 2. Yaxunah

“Yaxunah” may not be a household name in North America or Europe, perhaps not even in avowed foodie households where “Noma” and “Redzepi” might be part of the parlance. Yet the celebrated chefs who have visited Yaxunah and who have sourced ingredients from its gardens and fields have, deliberately or not, labeled the community as a gastronomical origin place—and that labeling has a real effect on the ground, bringing “foodie” tourists to the community and increasing demand for Yaxunah products. That labeling is not because Yaxunah’s cuisine is inherently exceptional among the hundreds of similar small towns across the Yucatán Peninsula, but because of Yaxunah’s particular and changing role within the history of neoliberal sustainable development projects in rural Mexico.

Yaxunah is a town (officially a *localidad*, informally called a *pueblo* in Spanish; here we refer to it using “town” and “village” interchangeably) of about 600 people in central Yucatán state (Figure 2). Yucatec Mayan and Spanish are commonly spoken. Yaxunah maintains a local government building, elementary and junior high school, a small health clinic, several places of worship, a community center, and an open area for cooking demos and other group events [5–9]. Well into the 1980s, Yaxunah households traditionally relied on farming, gardening, and harvesting wild resources for their subsistence, but increasingly, souvenir crafting and other tourism-based cottage industries have become key to people’s livelihoods [10]. Many individuals from Yaxunah seek temporary employment opportunities in cities and tourist areas like Cancun, often returning to the village on the weekend.



**Figure 2.** Yaxunah’s location in Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula. From Google Earth.

The town is surrounded by its *ejido*, or collectively owned landholding, designated during the national agrarian reforms of the 1930s. Yaxunah’s *ejido* includes several archaeological sites, one of which, the similarly named Yaxuná, has been partly restored and attracts a small number of tourists. Yaxuná is not listed as one of Yucatán’s official archaeological zones open for tourism, though, and so most visitors coming into the peninsula’s interior are channeled directly into UNESCO World Heritage Site Chichén Itzá (about half an hour’s drive away). As part of the northern Maya lowlands region, Yaxunah’s *ejido* lands are characterized by low-lying scrub forest, a terrain of thin soils and superficial bedrock, lack of surface water, and vast networks of subterranean features including caves and cenotes (natural sinkholes through which fresh water can be accessed). Agriculture has never been particularly profitable in this part of the peninsula, and during much of the historic period, Yaxunah fell along

the border of the henequen zone, the western part of the peninsula where the cactus-like henequen plant was cultivated on an industrial scale.

### 3. Archaeologists in Yaxunah

Traces of prehispanic and Colonial-era life are abundant in the Yaxunah ejido. Archaeologists first visited Yaxuná in the 1930s before the ejido was officially recognized [11]. Later, in the mid-1980s, focused archaeological research began and, under a series of projects, it has continued to the present day [12–16]. In this article, we consider not the research contributions of archaeology in the Yaxunah ejido, but rather the roles archaeologists have played in the Yaxunah community, especially in relation to food heritage. Archaeologists are not the only non-local academics based in Yaxunah. Cultural anthropologists Grace Bascopé and Elías Alcocer Puerto have been working in the community for years. Their contributions are critical to our understanding of Yaxunah cultural heritage. Additionally, Yucatecan university students and their professors often visit Yaxunah to participate in service-learning and field-based research.

The Proyecto de Interacción Política del Centro de Yucatán (PIPCY) was the active project based at Yaxunah in the 2017 field season. PIPCY directors and project members are a mix of foreign (primarily U.S. American) and Mexican archaeologists. Since 2007, PIPCY has investigated the political relationships and interdependencies among a group of archaeological sites, centered around the village of Yaxunah, that date to all eras of Maya history.

During active field seasons, as many as 24 PIPCY archaeologists live in a field camp situated between the Yaxuná archaeological site and the modern town of Yaxunah. The earlier Selz Project built the camp on land owned by the ejido and used it as project housing for nine field seasons before donating it to the Yaxunah community in 1997 [5]. After a cooperative of Yaxunah families experimented unsuccessfully with running the property as an ecolodge, the compound returned to its original role as an archaeological camp [17]. Currently, the Yaxunah ejido owns the camp and loans use of it to the archaeological project.

Like other archaeological projects authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History; INAH), PIPCY employs locals for fieldwork and logistical support. We, along with our collaborators, work with Yaxunah authorities in the comisario ejidal, who oversee all matters having to do with ejido lands (including archaeological sites) and the comisario municipal, who govern matters in the town itself (including the camp). Since the Selz Project, Yaxunah men have been employed to work on excavations, clearing brush, and other tasks in the field. Yaxunah women have been employed to cook, clean, and wash laundry. This system of gendered work was suggested by the members of the Yaxunah community and upholds gendered expectations in the village.

One of the main areas of logistical support is the provisioning of archaeologists who are expected to work long hours and are in unfamiliar culinary terrain. There have always been cooks from the village who come to the camp to prepare meals for the crew. There are no restaurants in Yaxunah, and when archaeological research began in the 1980s there was only one man in the town who had any experience preparing food outside the home. Over time, younger women have offered to work as cooks and today there are at least two dozen women who take turns preparing food for the archaeological project in the camp. Given how long archaeologists have been present in Yaxunah, some of these women have grown up around foreign archaeologists and have a sophisticated understanding of what non-Maya people enjoy most about Maya cuisine. This familiarity with the eccentricities of the North American and European palate played a role in how people from Yaxunah understood the food prepared at Noma.

We each first joined archaeological excavations at Yaxuná as graduate students, Ardren on the Selz Project in the 1980s and Fisher on PIPCY in the 2010s. To disclose some of the identities informing our perspectives: We are both from the United States, both white cis women, both non-native Spanish speakers, and both currently faculty at private universities in the United States. We are both



“food-adventurers” [18]. Fisher [19] completed her doctoral fieldwork at a small site in the Yaxunah ejido and plans to continue research with the community. Ardren [20] also completed her doctoral fieldwork at a site in the Yaxunah ejido. After time working elsewhere in the northern Maya lowlands, Ardren returned to Yaxunah as a co-director of PIPCY, and more recently as co-director of a project investigating the longest ancient Maya road that connects Yaxuná to the site of Cobá. For each of us, we orient our archaeological research around questions of past foodways, agriculture, gardening, and households—and we have both found that community-based work in Yaxunah has been instrumental to the way we frame and answer those questions. Culinary heritage is foundational to our archaeological practice.

#### 4. Stakeholders in Yaxunah Culinary Heritage

If something as intangible as foodways could be said to belong to anyone, we might say that Yaxunah foodways belong to Yaxunah community members themselves. Culinary heritage, though, is a messier matter. Culinary heritage is an unfolding conversation about food, society, and history that invites multiple stakeholders, with different perspectives and backgrounds, to the table. Culinary heritage can be debated and dissected, its authenticity evaluated from multiple perspectives, none of which is definitive.

Stakeholders in Yaxunah’s culinary heritage, then, include people like us—foreign archaeologists interested in understanding the connections between past and present foodways (and whose employment depends, to a degree, on our ability to publish on and teach those connections to college students)—as well as the farmers, gardeners, cooks, and families for whom that heritage is a birthright. We acknowledge that the stakes of eating are hard to define, since all people eat and simply to eat a meal does not necessarily a culinary stakeholder make; stakeholding is perhaps more accurately conceived as practice than as an identity. We are also not interested in imposing an impermeable boundary between the “ancient Maya” and the Maya of today. Nor do we want to privilege our position over those of the other stakeholders. We would instead prefer, as Patricia McNany [21] (p. 6) puts it, to “engage with an archaeological practice that is more uncertain but more inclusive.” Understanding how local and non-local stakeholders have found their seats at the table of Yaxunah’s culinary heritage requires historical context. With that said, the discussion we offer here is not exhaustive. We do not attempt to account for all the stakeholders involved in Yaxunah’s culinary heritage; we acknowledge that many more exist, and we look forward to future opportunities to collaborate and learn together. We will resist the urge to begin the story three millennia ago (we are archaeologists, after all), and instead jump in just under three decades ago.

##### 4.1. Neoliberal Agrarian Reforms

In the winter of 1992, the presidents of the United States and Mexico signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Their signatures pushed forward the agrarian and economic reforms that would fundamentally alter the food systems of the two countries [22].

In Yaxunah as in many small Mexican farming towns, NAFTA meant an influx of cheap, highly processed food and drinks. Soda and other incarnations of high fructose corn syrup pose public health problems for the community [23]. Their abundance as cheap sources of calories alters, too, the decisions and practices of farmers. Climate change has disrupted the rhythms and cues of the agricultural cycle in Yucatán. Growing crops has frequently been challenging in this area, but it is particularly risky in times of uncertainty, and farming families in Yaxunah choose to buffer that risk with store-bought food. Over the last three decades, some families in Yaxunah have cut back on or cut out farming altogether, shifting their time and energy away from the subsistence economy and into activities that will earn cash [10].

The same year NAFTA was signed also saw Mexico revise its constitution’s laws on agricultural land tenure. These changes targeted Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution. For decades previous, Article 27 was revered as a victory for the country’s agrarian population because it established the ejido

system: A system of federally protected, community-based land tenure [24]. Before 1992, ejido lands belonged to ejidatarios (community members who hold generational rights to ejido lands) and their descendants in perpetuity; rights to ejido lands could not be purchased or sold. The 1992 revisions to Article 27 made it legal for communities to vote to sell their lands [25]. In Yucatán, potential buyers for ejido lands are plentiful. Developers are hungry for lands in peri-urban areas and areas with touristic potential (e.g., coastal ejidos; ejidos near or including archaeological sites), to the point where some have even forged community votes as a means of co-opting land from resistant ejidatarios [26,27].

Yaxunah's ejido was formally established in 1934. Today, Yaxunah ejidatarios claim 4066 hectares of land that not only includes agricultural fields, but also forest, cenotes, and archaeological sites. Yaxuneros—both those who claim official ejidatario status as well as many who do not—use ejido lands to farm; to gather wild foods and to hunt; to collect firewood, building materials, forage, and water; to graze livestock and to care for bees; to participate in rituals; to guide tourists around the Yaxuná archaeological zone or to work on archaeological excavations; and even to make phone calls from the peak of a renovated pyramid with inexplicably good cell signal (cell service does not yet reach most of the village). The ejido system has ensured generational land security to Yaxunah farming families even with the Article 27 revisions of 1992.

However, this may be changing. Yaxunah is 25 km from Chichén Itzá, the UNESCO World Heritage Site and capital of a growing inland tourism hub. Already a highway connects Chichén Itzá east to coastal Cancun and west to Mérida. In 2009, 520 thousand square meters of ejido land just 10 kilometers north of Yaxunah were purchased for the “Mayan Disneyland” or Palace of Mayan Civilization, which was designed as a multi-purpose Cancun-style resort with luxury hotels, swimming pools, golf courses, etc., in the middle of the peninsula. This project, which had the backing of then-governor Ivonne Ortega Pacheco, was ultimately abandoned with only the immense paved parking lot left along the road to Yaxunah [28]. Nearby Chichén Itzá will be a prominent stop on the proposed “Mayan Train,” an ambitious rail system promising to pump tourists from the beaches of Tulum to the mountains of Palenque, supported by the current president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and which is set to cost over 7 billion USD [29]. Yaxunah is only a short 30-minute drive away. As a picturesque traditional community with the blessing of celebrity chefs, it is easy to imagine Yaxunah ejidatarios will soon be weighing offers from motivated developers.

In fact, they already are. During the summers of 2013–2017, local gossip (selectively shared by Yaxuneros from time to time with archaeologists) hinted at the visits of interested buyers. Offers to buy ejido lands were debated and ultimately rejected by Yaxunah ejidatarios. At the time, they were too small to entice the needed majority, and many ejidatarios are familiar with the risks of becoming landless. We, as outsiders, were not privy to these negotiations, and gathered news of them instead as fragments shared during the slower spells of summer fieldwork.

#### *4.2. Sustainable Development Projects*

Let us return to 1992: The same year NAFTA would be signed, a group of business and intellectual leaders chartered a state-sponsored initiative to improve the livelihoods of Yucatán's rural communities. The leaders of the resulting non-profit, Fundación Cultural Yucatán (FCY), professed goals of promoting education, cultural diversity, ecological stewardship, and economic development. FCY was a product of the neoliberal 1990s; its advisory board included at least one Coca-Cola México executive [30].

FCY chose Yaxunah for one of its major development efforts. Though FCY tried to get several so-called sustainable development projects off the ground in Yaxunah, the “sustainable” qualifier of these projects turned out to be more aspirational than realistic. FCY helped launch educational workshops, a poultry farm, an ecolodge (the once and future archaeological camp), and an ecotourism trail, but most projects were short-lived [5,17].

Despite these letdowns, the nonprofit FCY's early involvement in Yaxunah cleared a path for more development projects in the 21st century. Late in 2002, Hurricane Isidore devastated the Yucatán Peninsula. Just weeks later, another nonprofit organization called the Fundación Haciendas del Mundo

Maya (FHMM) formed to provide aid to Maya families affected by the hurricane. FHMM, then and now, maintains close ties to Banamex, the second largest bank in Mexico. Over the next few years, FHMM sponsored development projects throughout Yucatán: Adult education programs, heritage botanical gardens, cultural events and workshops, libraries, as well as new sports fields, community centers, houses, and infrastructure [31]. The organization also began creating commercial channels for the sale of artisanal products.

#### 4.3. *Cooks and Chefs*

While the growing nonprofit FHMM cultivated a presence across the peninsula, a group of cooks who had worked for the archaeological projects in Yaxunah were mobilizing to tap into the networks first established by the earlier, ultimately unsuccessful, FCY nonprofit organization. These cooks were aided by the Centro Cultural de Yaxunah (CCY), Yaxunah's local cultural center. The CCY had evolved from the earlier ecotourism ventures of the 1990s. In contrast to those ventures, however, the CCY is locally supported and locally administered—while still working with a board of Mexican and North American academics and advisors with nonprofit experience [7,8]. As one of its earliest initiatives, the CCY facilitated the founding of a culinary tourism cooperative in 2005. The cooperative, known as Lool K'uum or the Squash Blossom Committee, and discussed in detail in a recent article by Ardren [8], consisted then of 10 self-selected women from Yaxunah. These women noticed the increasing number of visitors coming into Yaxunah and recognized an opportunity. They pooled their resources to pay for professional training in the tastes, preferences, and potentially sensitive digestive systems of foreign tourists. This training was offered by a Maya speaking person who had been “certified” in food production standards, and the content of the training was situated within a cultural framework that perceives food preparation in small Maya pueblos to be “less sanitary” and Maya cooks ignorant of healthful practices. The cooks of Lool K'uum were aware of the prejudices that uphold their teacher and his curriculum, situated as such ideas are within larger structures of the institutionalized racism of Mexico. They had varying reactions to the curriculum, but agreed that they learned useful recipes of interest to tourists, which was their primary objective.

By 2008, FHMM had expanded into commercial ventures and launched a gourmet food brand, *Traspatio Maya*, through which they began marketing maize and vegetables produced by Maya communities to upscale buyers in the peninsula's urban and resort areas [32]. Five years into this branding venture, and eight years into the Lool K'uum collective's entrepreneurship, FHMM began collaborations with Yaxunah community members in 2013. Elías Alcocer Puerto, a Mexican cultural anthropologist (and our friend and colleague, though not officially affiliated with the archaeological project) who has been working in Yaxunah since the 1990s, was key in facilitating the FHMM-Lool K'uum collaboration.

To assist with its projects in Yaxunah, FHMM brought in specialists from yet another nonprofit, the Centro Internacional de Mejoramiento de Maíz y Trigo (International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center; CIMMYT), a Mexican research and training institution with its origins in earlier agricultural development programs funded by the Mexican federal government and the Rockefeller Foundation. Agricultural scientists from CIMMYT ran workshops teaching Yaxunah farmers “best practices” (*mejores prácticas*) for milpa farming while promoting the cultivation of landrace (heirloom) maize varieties [31]. At a time when farmers across Mexico were being compelled to plant hybrid corn, which is genetically engineered and leaves farmers reliant on pesticides, mechanized equipment, and multinational biotechnology firms [21], landrace maize grown in communities like Yaxunah became increasingly scarce. In Yaxunah's case, FHMM recognized the market for niche commodities like landrace corn and began selling it under the *Traspatio Maya* brand. Some of that maize, though, stayed in Yaxunah and was used by the women of the Lool K'uum collective to make high-quality, handmade tortillas.

FHMM and Yaxunah community leaders first began facilitating celebrity chef visits to Yaxunah in the 2010s. The very concept of a celebrity chef was taking on new meaning in the social media

age, and looking back at the digital content of that time it seems many chefs were vying to engage with so-called authentic regional cuisines—and to be the ones who introduced those cuisines to their public followings. FHMM had become a point of contact for global actors interested in accessing “traditional” Maya culture in Yucatán. Since FHMM was already selling Yaxunah produce, bringing chefs to the community posed synergistic opportunities for promoting the Traspatio Maya brand. Personal relationships between FHMM’s leadership team and cultural anthropologist Elías Alcocer Puerto were key to these logistics. When seeking out the reasons why celebrity chefs started paying attention to Yaxunah, it is equally important to consider the decades of experience Yaxuneros already had in translating their culture to interested outsiders. Because of the community’s involvement with sustainable development programs and foreign research projects, Yaxunah cooks arguably have a deeper familiarity with the palates of non-local visitors than cooks in most small Maya towns. Not only do the cooks of Yaxunah understand Maya cuisine, they understand the cultural capital that it holds in the right setting.

Rick Bayless, a Chicago-based chef whose brand includes more than a dozen Mexican restaurants and a line of “authentic” gourmet Mexican food products, visited Yaxunah in summer 2015 to film an episode of his television show, *Mexico: One Plate at a Time*. Clips from that episode show Bayless interacting with Lool K’uum cooks as they prepare cochinita pibil, a traditional pork dish cooked underground. After Yaxunah men dig up the roasting pan, the scene cuts to Bayless and Miriam Peraza (chef at Mérida restaurant Manjar Blanco and Bayless’ cultural liaison in Yaxunah) as they behold the steaming pig. They eagerly prepare tacos and begin to eat, while Bayless’ voiceover tells us, “Miriam offered me the unique opportunity to taste that pork right when it came out of the pit with some of those beautiful fresh-made corn tortillas. This is a unique flavor, unique to this place, cooked with this unique method from local ingredients. It’s a perfect expression of this community, its history, and its geography” [33].

Those same tortillas would bring another celebrity chef, René Redzepi, into Yaxunah’s orbit the following year. Redzepi had decided to shut down his flagship Copenhagen restaurant, Noma—ranked best restaurant in the world in 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2014 by *Restaurant* magazine—and open a pop-up restaurant, Noma Mexico, in Tulum for seven weeks in spring 2017. In the months leading up to the pop-up, Redzepi landed in Yucatán, uncertain how he would realize his vision. Wandering Mérida, Redzepi stumbled upon FHMM in a serendipitous encounter—at least serendipitous in the telling of Jeff Gordinier, a *New York Times* food critic then traveling alongside Redzepi. Samples of Traspatio Maya foods were eaten, Redzepi was intrigued, and soon FHMM had arranged to take the chef and his team on a tour of the countryside to visit its supplier villages, including Yaxunah (Figure 3).

Redzepi’s first visit to Yaxunah is chronicled in Gordinier’s 2019 memoir, *Hungry: Eating, Road-Tripping, and Risking it All with the Greatest Chef in the World*. The chefs arrived in the village. The cooks of the Lool K’uum collective prepared their signature dish: Cochinita pibil. As the men unearthed the roasted pig, Redzepi watched entranced as the women made tortillas. Gordinier [34] recalls the moment: “Suddenly Redzepi had an idea. “We should ask them what they’re doing in April and May.”” The chefs ate. Redzepi was impressed, decided then and there to source all the maize Noma Mexico would need from Yaxunah. FHMM would broker the arrangement through Traspatio Maya. Gordinier [34] (p. 188) continues: “But it was clear that (Redzepi) now felt as though he had to take things a step further . . . A few months later the result of his decision was on full display in between the dining room and the kitchen at the pop-up in Tulum.” The tortilla-makers, who would populate the scenery of food critics’ reviews in weeks to come, had been found. As Redzepi and his creative partner Rosio Sanchez (a Mexican American chef and owner of Copenhagen restaurant Hija de Sanchez) would later write, “We chose to source our corn from Yaxunah because it was there that we tasted the best tortillas of our entire trip” [35]. Many touristic restaurants in Mérida or Cancun employ traditional tortilla-makers, either visible or hidden, as handmade tortillas are considered a mandatory component of Yucatecan high cuisine; Noma was not unique in this regard. We would suggest, though,



that very few or none of those restaurants paid for their tortilla-makers to travel 2.5 hours each way, every two weeks. Neither were these other restaurants met with the global attention given to Noma Mexico. In what had already become recognized as the quintessential Noma way, Redzepi identified local traditions but made them his own.



**Figure 3.** René Redzepi, Rosio Sanchez, and the Noma crew visit Chichén Itzá. Photograph courtesy of Noma and used with permission. Accessible at <https://noma.dk/the-weather-report/noma-mexico-the-building-site/>.

## 5. Culinary Heritage Work on the Ground

Patricia McAnany [21] has compared cultural heritage work to maneuvering a busy intersection. We could say that working in Yaxunah's culinary heritage in late spring and early summer of 2017 was like navigating a congested *glorieta*, one of the roundabouts in urban Mérida: Heavily trafficked, somewhat chaotic, and often unclear who was going where.

We showed up ready to continue our archaeological research on past Maya farming and foodways. Yaxunah farmers were weighing the risks of planting a crop, given that the weather had been unpredictable and crop failures discouragingly common in recent years. Soon, *ejidatarios* would be courted by a developer offering to buy part of the *ejido*. Cooks of the Lool K'uum collective who were willing to live in a Tulum apartment for two weeks, away from their families, had started their stints as tortilla-makers in Noma Mexico. They rotated their time in Tulum and Yaxunah, returning home with stories about sleeping in beds (not hammocks) for the first time, and laughing about the *salbutes* served in the restaurant, which they agreed were ridiculously small and included things they did not consider edible, like flowers and seaweed.

Though there was no formal interaction between the famous chefs and archaeological project, the chefs left traces. One day during excavations, Fisher noticed one of the excavators was wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with Rick Bayless' TV show logo. When she asked him where he got it, he shrugged and said, some guy. Ardren went looking for local authorities one afternoon and found them serving food to a large table of chefs including Rosio Sanchez—no one at the table seemed to notice the arrival of other non-Yaxuneros. Another day, during an afternoon celebration for Yaxunah's patron saint, a couple of archaeologists were mildly scandalized to see young Noma chefs publicly drinking,

dancing, and even making out. For those of us on the archaeological project, public gatherings—and especially religious gatherings—were occasions where we were most vigilant about our personal behavior, especially since Yaxunah is a dry town and, as a whole, fairly conservative. Later, we laughed about our reaction, because no one from Yaxunah seemed to care about the Noma team's good time. In fact, one of the most unusual aspects of the summer of 2017 was that in this tiny village where we were accustomed to being the only non-locals, there were suddenly many tall, pale, scruffy young foreign chefs coming and going, eating and visiting. We knew Yaxunah had become a destination for chefs to visit, but we had not experienced how consuming those visits were for this small town. Now, other women and their families were also offering to cook cochinita pibil for visitors, a process that involved whole extended families as well as local authorities (who can be counted on to have a working cell phone). These large meals in Yaxunah require shopping trips to the nearest market 30 minutes away, borrowing cooking and serving vessels from people throughout the village, procurement of forest materials and household garden spices—they are a major production that occupied many people in this otherwise very quiet and unflappable place. When viewed alongside the steady presence of the Lool K'uum collective (8), which feeds college students, teachers, and other volunteers, the expansion of food for pay during the summer of 2017 marks the emergence of a new phase of culinary tourism in Yaxunah. Celebrity chefs “discovered” a place where food had been made for outside visitors for the last 30 years; in 2017, there was suddenly a greater demand and more economic benefit to be had than ever before. Two-and-a-half hours' drive east from Yaxunah, René Redzepi, Rosio Sanchez, and the rest of the Noma Mexico crew were serving up dinners at \$750 USD a head after taxes.

All of us were circling the glorieta of Yaxunah's culinary heritage. For the two of us writing: how we navigated that intersection was, of course, informed by our identities as foreign archaeologists. Below, we each contribute a narrative of what it was like to participate in Yaxunah culinary heritage work during the heightened conditions of the 2017 field season. We present these narratives transparently, providing an account of what happened “on-the-ground”.

### *5.1. Walking and Talking in the Eijido, Told by Chelsea Fisher*

I opened camp in Yaxunah right after our permits came through in April 2017. It was my third and last season of dissertation fieldwork at Tzacauil, a small archaeological site about 30 minutes' drive from the town of Yaxunah east into the forested ejido lands. I wanted to figure out how Tzacauil's ancient farming households had used the open spaces (ouselots) around their dwellings at different points in history. When I arrived, it was still late dry season and the absence of vegetation made it easy to see subtle features on the ground: Slight differences in bedrock and soil, tiny ancillary structures, and land-use features. If I could document where those features were, I would be able to piece togetherouselot activities across the site. I also wanted to document how modern farmers and gardeners understood the landscape, and to archive those insights into a map of Tzacauil using digital humanities methods. With a sense that the rains could start at any time, I decided to hold off on excavation and instead gather a team for survey.

I met with local authorities to explain my plan and to ask for assistance assembling a group of six ejidatarios to work on the survey. I told them that it would be a week's work, paid the regular wage, but that it would entail walking and talking instead of the usual clearing and excavating. The authorities chose four men from the pool who had already signed up to work on our project that season. Their selections were deliberate: Understanding my goals at Tzacauil, the authorities selected ejidatarios who were strongly invested in local history and familiar with the eastern ejido lands. I had worked with all four many times in my previous seasons at Yaxunah and was happy to work with them again.

I had also asked if I could hire women ejidatarias for this work.ouselots, now and in the past, have been sites of women's domestic labor (e.g., cooking, gardening, washing) in Yucatán. My plan for surveying Tzacauil'souselot areas was to imagine, collectively, “if we were living at this house, how would we use the space around it?” (i.e., what spots are best for gardening, collecting water, building, walking, depositing waste, etc.) I wanted to know what men and women intimately

familiar with the central Yucatán landscape—as well as the nature of farming and gardening in that landscape—would see in Tzacauil’s forest and put their observations into conversation with my own as an outsider and an archaeologist. Women were an important part of that plan.

However, women had never been hired for archaeological fieldwork in the Yaxunah ejido, not by our project nor by its predecessors. My proposal to include women was initially met with resistance from ejido authorities (themselves male). Yaxunah’s municipal branch (headed by the first female comisaria, elected in 2016) supported the idea from the start, but their jurisdiction concerned the town, not the ejido nor its archaeological sites. I attended a few more meetings with ejidal authorities, each time bearing offerings of ice-cold drinks, as the town treasurer (a sympathetic friend) had instructed me. We sat in plastic chairs, sipped Coke, and talked. As with many of our meetings with local authorities, most of the discussion was in Yucatec Mayan (a language I do not speak) so I had to rely on the occasional post hoc summary offered in Spanish. The authorities conveyed they were concerned women would get too tired in the field and would not be interested in working.

To this last point, the authorities decided to invite the few women who held ejidataria rights to attend a meeting. Six women came and heard my proposal, with ejidal authorities facilitating and translating as needed. We eventually agreed that if the women wanted, they were welcome to show up for one week of “walking and talking” fieldwork beginning the following Monday (May 1, 2017). All six expressed interest. When the sun rose on Monday, I nervously walked out of camp, anxious to see if anyone had come. To my relief, I saw assembled around my truck the four men I had worked with previously and two women from the meeting. These two señoras were the first Yaxunera women to work on a local archaeological field project in more than three decades of near-continuous research.

The seven of us drove out into the ejido forest each morning that first week of May. I used an iPad and GPS to record the ejidatarios’ stories and our observations directly into a georeferenced LiDAR image of Tzacauil. We started out in the houselot areas as originally planned, but midway through the first day I realized we were going faster than I had expected. I panicked. I had hired everyone for a week of this “walking and talking” and we were going to be out of things to do in two days. So, I improvised: I slowed us down. We started breaking more, taking longer lunches.

I can admit, slowing down started as stalling (how can we fill five days of this?) but turned into something else altogether as I gave up micromanaging the flow of our work. We were more relaxed. The conversation became less guarded. To be clear, the shared awareness that I was paying these six individuals to hang out in the woods with me was always present, but the pace and direction of what we would do with this paid time together was no longer my exclusive decision, but that of the group. We left Tzacauil and visited other places in the ejido, places that held significance for the ejidatarios. I put aside the notions of what was “relevant” to my project that I had formed before even arriving in Mexico, and just listened.

Lunches changed the most in this new order. In earlier seasons at Tzacauil, lunch had been for me a frantic half hour to catch up on paperwork and scarf down a granola bar, while the crew would eat pozole and rest at a distance. In the 2017 season and beginning with this survey crew, lunches stretched out to an hour or more as food and conversation were shared.

That first week, Noma came up in conversation every day with the men and women of the survey team. Noma was buying eggs, vegetables, and herbs from some households in the community. Their prices were dissected: There were reports of three pesos per egg (compared to the two pesos an egg would sell for in the local store), 40 per kilo of chaya (a leafy green), 50 per kilo of epazote (an herb), 12 per kilo of maize. We talked about the Yaxunah women currently in Tulum making tortillas for Noma diners. We shared news of what we had heard from the cooks who had already come back. I asked how much Noma was paying the tortilla-makers. Though no one knew for sure, their impression was that the women were making \$2000 pesos per week (double the wage that archaeologists were allowed to pay crews in Mexico in 2017), but that much of the money was lost on Tulum’s inflated costs of living. I plugged the price of a meal at Noma Mexico—\$600 USD before tax—into my phone’s calculator and

converted it to pesos under the current exchange rate. I showed them the screen: \$10,800 pesos for one meal. I could not tell if they believed me.

At one lunch, survey team member Don Ernesto (name has been changed), an elder and recognized authority in the Yaxunah community, told me that he had an upcoming meeting with CIMMYT agricultural technicians. He was experimenting with organic maize agriculture with CIMMYT support, he said, because Noma and other restaurants want to buy everything *todo natural*, *todo orgánico* (all natural, all organic). Don Ernesto told me that making milpa (the polycultural, slash-fire cultivation traditionally practiced in Yucatán) organically was different from doing it the normal way. He told me that organic food is grown by leaving *lo orgánico* on the ground to decompose. To illustrate, Don Ernesto grabbed a handful of dry leaves from the forest floor and crumbled them; I realized by “*lo orgánico*” he meant organic matter, leaf litter. Leaving *lo orgánico* on the land instead of burning it keeps the nutrients in the soil, he said, and so corn grown in that soil is organic. As the conversation moved onto other topics, still I was struck by this well-meaning but distorted takeaway from CIMMYT’s organic farming workshops. Given that FHMM and CIMMYT feature photographs of Don Ernesto prominently in their promotional materials, I was baffled, too, that he had been given such a simplistic explanation of organic farming. It seemed as if the branding capacity of the word “organic” was prioritized over practical understanding. Or perhaps, since Spanish is a second language for many elders in the Yaxunah community and CIMMYT’s workshops were most likely offered predominantly in Spanish, it is also possible that language barriers contributed to misunderstanding.

We finished our week of walking and talking around the ejido, and then I began excavations with a new crew. We worked through September 2017. Talk of Noma ended with the closing of the pop-up in late May, but the newfound emphasis on slow lunches and open conversations continued through the long field season. The time spent conversing during lunch profoundly shifted the culture of work at Tzacauil. Lunches themselves became communal, and increasingly elaborate (Figure 4). I documented most of the daily meals the men and I shared with my cell phone camera, and some ejidatarios began to do the same.



**Figure 4.** An elaborate mid-morning meal during excavations at Tzacauil. Photo by Chelsea Fisher.



We seldom drew overt connections between the food we shared, prepared in the pre-dawn hours by the men's wives (some of whom had cooked at Noma Mexico), and the broken dishes, bowls, and grinding stones resurfacing in the ancient kitchens we were excavating. However, I like to think that during those lunches, we expressed in our eating a quiet respect for the deep history of Yaxunah's culinary heritage.

### *5.2. Maya Primicia and Global Conversations, Told by Traci Ardren*

I arrived to Yaxunah in mid-May of 2017, after wrapping up a long stint as departmental chair and ready to begin a huge new three-year National Science Foundation funded project. The logistics of the sacbe project were heavy on my mind, as we would be living and working in three separate locations and I knew the loss of paid income when we were away would be a burden on the people of Yaxunah. I was really pleased to learn so many people in the village were benefitting from Noma Mexico, and that there were wages coming in that while temporary, were substantial. I had three undergraduate students with me, all of them interested in the food tourism research I had planned for 2017. We had household excavations to get started, meetings with local authorities to schedule, and a primicia to arrange as quickly as possible.

A primicia is the local Yucatec Maya offering ceremony that prevents any member of the archaeological project from coming to harm (like snake bite or fall) during the field season [36,37]. A large offering of food and prayers are made to the guardian spirits that live in the archaeological site and if it is successful, the work will proceed without incident. I have written elsewhere about the long history of archaeologists collaborating with Maya shamans, or h'men in Yucatec—this tradition began in the 1930s at the urging of local elders, and it is widespread within archaeological projects in the area today [38]. As a young member of the Selz Foundation project at Yaxunah in the 1980s, project director David Freidel took the counsel of local elders very seriously and I learned that these ceremonies were one of the most important responsibilities of the archaeological project. I was honored to learn how to assist the local shaman with preparations, and I was looking forward to being part of the whole process again in 2017.

Less than two weeks after arriving in the village I sought out the shaman, a local farmer who also did ceremonies for a wide variety of clients—family, friends, and enemies from the village as well as curious visitors and tourists who were able to pay well. Don Ricardo Cupul (name has been changed) was old enough to be my father, I met him when I was only 22 years old and we had known each other for 18 years. While charismatic and skilled at his spiritual work, he was also a drinker who could be difficult to find in the evenings. Despite my efforts to reach him in the morning, his wife told me and my students to come by one evening to discuss the logistics of that year's primicia. We arrived about 8 pm and waited on the road by the invisible gate to be invited into the yard and house in the manner of people who do not have doorbells or many other ways to assure privacy. We were invited into their two-room home, given the only plastic chairs available, while Don Ricardo sat in his hammock. Everyone agreed the huge old tree that collapsed onto Chelsea's truck while we were all sleeping safely in camp was a sign the primicia was especially needed this year. While the two of us have done these negotiations many, many times, I asked him some questions this time about what would happen—in the past, I felt that was not my place, but this year was different and I am grateful for that inspiration as Don Ricardo passed away in the spring of 2019.

We would need to pay six women to prepare the food and this would take two full days of work. Even with many of the local women traveling to Noma, there were plenty of women who could do this, these were skills every woman in the village possessed, he told me. He was happy to recommend six of his relatives. The women would prepare a homemade recado rojo, or seasoning mixture made of whole peppercorns, roasted garlic, cinnamon, cloves, and oregano—local achiote would be added later. We would need to purchase the spices and 60 chickens, people in town who wanted to attend would bring a bucket of corn masa from each family. I also needed a lot of aguardiente, candles, and incense, which is only sold in little envelopes in the villages and might have been the hardest ingredient to

obtain. A lot of the cooking would take place in the archaeological camp, which was a new innovation this year and I didn't see any reason to argue with him on this. Over the years, as culinary tourism has increased in Yaxunah, even Don Ricardo (whose wife is not a member of Lool K'uum) has become more aware of the cultural and monetary capital to be obtained by emphasizing the "Mayaness" of his rituals. Early on we bought commercial packets of recado rojo; now he expects we will expect it to be made by hand. Early on we purchased the cheapest form of aguardiente possible; now he has a label he requests.

In 2017, we held the primicia on the archaeological site, which was the way I experienced the ceremony during the Selz Foundation project, but the tradition had fallen away in subsequent years. Don Ricardo was happy when I suggested this idea, and knew the exact spot to set up that would both be close to the guardian spirits at the center of the site, and under the correct species of tree that was nice and shady. The first part of the ritual he does privately with just a few assistants. A large table sized altar is built of specific woods and vines, candles mark the four directions. Clearing the area, gathering the correct plants, and building the altar took a full day. The ritual continued with a petition to ask the spirits for permission to do the archaeological research safely and without obstacles. Then, there was a huge offering of food to everyone in the community (all archaeologists were required to attend!). The spirits received their food offering earlier in the ceremony, when the chickens were made to drink blessed alcohol and then dispatched, to be cooked in the corn masa along with the recado rojo. An underground oven or pib, with loaves of corn and squash seed bread, was opened as the food was served, and many loaves placed on the altar (Figure 5). The final event in the ceremony, once everyone had as much free-range chicken, dense corn bread, and Coca-Cola as they could consume, is a limpieza or cleansing for all the project members and Don Ricardo's ritual assistants.



**Figure 5.** Don Ricardo's primicia altar, with offerings of chicken, maize, and alcohol. Photo by Traci Ardren.

It was my experience that the presence of Noma Mexico in the village heightened many aspects of the primicia. In many other seasons, the primicia was the largest and most elaborate social and food-based event of the summer, but in 2017, it was one more event in a series of feasts. The primicia also used to be one of the few places people from the village and archaeologists shared a meal—meals

are now shared with outsiders on a regular basis. Even the context for obtaining the ceremonial supplies had changed. Buying that many chickens and spices—a hugely extravagant expense by local standards—was not really a cause for any particular attention or gossip this summer, as the two competing cooking cooperatives regularly had large supply runs and of course FHMM was purchasing large quantities of corn, eggs, and vegetables from many households in the village.

I had long ago accepted the fact that Don Ricardo did rituals for non-believers and charged them loads of money; how this subsistence farmer supported himself was really none of my business. But 2017 was the first summer where the social value of food had been elevated to a place where the concerns of very wealthy Europeans and Mexicans for *todo orgánico* recontextualized the Maya food traditions of Yaxunah. This knowledge was now further capitalized, and treated as precious (in both the emotional and monetary sense) for no other reason than its ability to serve the palates and preferences of wealthy foodies in Tulum. The *primicia* chicken and corn stew was still served on disposable Styrofoam plates but I think everyone eating it, except maybe the youngest kids, was aware that the aesthetic of the meal had changed. What had been traditional Maya ritual food, a little rough around the edges and possibly challenging to foreign stomachs, was now part of a big complex conversation about hot button concepts like culinary authenticity, local traditions, and food advocacy.

## 6. Discussion: What's next?

Noma Mexico ended its run on May 28, 2017. The women of the Lool K'uum collective returned to preparing meals in Yaxunah for tourists. The tourists, in turn, posted photos of themselves eating said meals on social media, often garnished with hashtags proclaiming the food's (and, implicitly, their own) authenticity. For our part, we reentered academic life in the United States, and, as with the end of every field season, began abstracting our experiences into the stuff of publications, grant proposals, and technical reports. Three years later, we look back at 2017 and ask, where do we go from here?

A distinctly 21st century cultural moment of foodies and celebrity chefs and gastronomic optimism had, for better or for worse, reached peak saturation in 2017—it felt like food was everywhere, and that everyone wanted to talk about it as much as they wanted to eat it. In 2020, the landscape has changed. Farmworkers and grocery store employees are forced to risk their lives to keep food systems running during a global pandemic. Restaurants worldwide are shuttering. Laid-off kitchen and front-of-house staff wait desperately for unemployment checks to arrive. Our summer will be spent in the U.S. rather than doing research in Yaxunah due to university travel bans and safety concerns. As archaeologists and as stakeholders in culinary heritage, we hope to use this time to learn from the starkly different food landscapes of 2017 and 2020, and to take those lessons forward into better community-engaged work in Yaxunah.

Our participation in culinary heritage has led us to rethink methodologies for the study of past food and agriculture. Like other archaeologists engaged in community-engaged research, we can attest firsthand to the value—and, admittedly, sometimes the difficulty—of relinquishing the façade of our authority as “experts” during fieldwork. It may be comfortable to assert the image of being in control, with a certain kind of authority buttressing our assurances: Let me tell you the exact type-variety of that sherd, let me tell you that I absolutely expected to find this burial while excavating on a Friday afternoon, let me tell you why the ancient Maya simply could not have grown corn here. The time for that kind of archaeological monologue is long over.

Decentering our academic perspectives and opening to the authority of other stakeholders in the culinary past, most especially the authority of Yaxunah cooks, farmers, and gardeners, has taken years of work. It is an ongoing process, but one that has already yielded meaning. Preparing and sharing meals with community members resulted in a slower, more intentional archaeology in the 2017 field season. We were more attentive. Because we were more attentive, we were able to recognize residues of past food systems we had missed before. Yaxunah gardeners pointed out subtle shifts in soil quality in 2000-year-old houselots. Yaxunah farmers corrected us, with a laugh, that a presumed-ancient structure was actually a decade-old corn crib. Facilitating an elaborate *primicia* for project (local and

non-local) members slowed down our excavations, but it provided a space for all of us to observe and learn from Yaxunah cooks and shamans, rather than just from artifacts. It has not been perfect. We still have significant work to do to make archaeology at Yaxunah more inclusive at every step of knowledge production. We see that work as part of a larger effort to reckon with archaeology's neocolonial tendencies, while also clarifying archaeology's potential contribution to modern food sovereignty and sustainability. Our collective ability to collaborate with communities to build centennial-scale bridges between past and present food systems will determine whether we realize that potential.

We will keep returning to Yaxunah, but in this new culinary landscape, will the chefs? Less than a year after Noma Mexico closed, Redzepi had reopened the flagship Noma in Copenhagen, in a new location, and now as a small campus complete with a fermentation lab, urban farm, and staff sauna. Back in Tulum, Google Maps imagery (taken in May 2019) of the former Noma Mexico site shows shaggy thatched roofs dappled with dead leaves and an inner courtyard piled with black plastic garbage bags.

Yet, while the pop-up has become its own sort of archaeological site, Redzepi has kept coming back to Yaxunah. On his Instagram, a video posted in early 2019 shows tortillas cooking on a comal. The video is geotagged to Yaxunah. A woman sitting beside the fire, who we see only from the waist down but who wears a traditional huipil, flips a tortilla. The tortilla begins to puff up with hot air. The woman waits a beat, reaches her hand out, deftly pats the puffed tortilla, pulls back, and then reaches again to grab it while Redzepi exclaims excitedly with admiration for her skill; she laughs in response. A year later, in February 2020, Redzepi's Instagram shows he was back again. Amid lush posts showing tropical fruits, chicharrón, beaches, and cenotes from around the peninsula (he was on sabbatical with his family), he posts a video recorded at Yaxunah. It is a close-up of his hand, turning a jamaica flower delicately for the camera. In the background, we hear a woman speaking Spanish—it sounds like she is giving a presentation about local ingredients to a small audience, her voice coming in and out among whistles and whoops of children playing outside. Only a month after that, Redzepi appears to be back in Copenhagen, and posting the first of several Covid-19 updates. Everyone is figuring out what life post-pandemic will hold, and the culinary landscape will likely never be the same as it was in 2017. However, as we affirm our commitment to continuing work with Yaxunah community members and their culinary heritage, we are encouraged by Redzepi's signaled commitment to continuing to engage with the farmers, gardeners, and cooks who made Noma Mexico possible.

## 7. Conclusions

For archaeologists studying past foodways, the decision to partake actively in culinary heritage work with communities is an increasingly critical one if we want to contribute towards solving modern food issue—and if we want to dismantle archaeology's neocolonial tendencies. When archaeologists decenter our view of the past, and instead make room for the multivocal and sometimes competing authorities and perspectives of farmers and gardeners, cooks and chefs, "foodies" and eaters of all kinds, the work gets messier, true—but it also gets richer and more relevant. We gain a deeper understanding of traditional ecological and culinary knowledge systems and can more readily marshal the patterns in our archaeological data towards pressing issues of food sovereignty, rural land tenure, and agricultural sustainability. In this paper, we shared on-the-ground stories from our culinary heritage work during the particularly unusual 2017 field season at Yaxunah, when the signs of neoliberal, globalized food were apparent in ways they never had been before. We framed these narratives within recent historical context to emphasize that the attention of celebrity chefs and culinary tourists is not happening in a vacuum, but rather is inextricably linked to neoliberalism and so-called sustainable development. We share these stories with the hope that our colleagues in Maya archaeology, and especially those researching past food and agriculture, will join this open conversation about the challenges, surprises, and delights of partaking in culinary heritage work in the Maya area.



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