

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon ([00:00:07](#)):

Hello and welcome to the Mapping the Doctrine of Discovery podcast. The producers of this podcast would like to acknowledge with respect the Onondaga Nation, Fire Keepers of the Haudenosaunee, the Indigenous peoples on whose ancestral lands of Syracuse University now stands. And now, introducing your hosts, Phil Arnold and Sandy Bigtree.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:00:30](#)):

Welcome back to Mapping the Doctrine of Discovery. My name is Phil Arnold. I'm faculty in the Religion Department at Syracuse University and founding director of Skanonh Great Law Peace Center.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:00:41](#)):

And I'm Sandy Bigtree, a citizen of the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne, and I'm on the Academic Collaborative of Skanonh Center, and also a director of the Indigenous... Not director, you're director. I'm on the board of the Indigenous Values Initiative.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:01:00](#)):

Mapping the Doctrine of Discovery is sponsored by the Henry Luce Foundation. Today, we're super happy to have with us Victor Valle, who is an author of many books, but the book that we're going to be talking about today is *The Poetics of Fire: Metaphors of Chile Eating in the Borderlands*. Victor, I'd like for you to say a few words about yourself.

Victor Valle ([00:01:27](#)):

Okay. Thank you for inviting me to your program. I'm an emeritus professor at California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo, otherwise known as Cal Poly. I write on urban politics, economy, food, and a variety of media outlets including the Los Angeles Times and *Gastronomica*, and also author of *Recipe of Memory: Five Generations of Mexican Cuisine*. I sort of go between food studies and urban studies.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:02:00](#)):

Fantastic.

Victor Valle ([00:02:01](#)):

I'm looking about practice. Material, daily, quotidian practice, and how we take... And how do we give... The other thing, how do we give the culinary arts a strong aesthetic basis in ecology? Which means every cuisine will have to go through this process on their own. They won't be able to assume... They'll have a method, hopefully what I'm providing, but where they actually work out the poetics. I've talked to people from India and they were very happy that I had done this. They go, "Yes." And I said, "Well, they wanted me to do it for India." I said, "I can't do it for you guys. It's taken me to read hundreds and thousands of documents," because one of the biggest problems we have is with collation.

([00:02:48](#)):

To do what I did requires a collation of a lot of... There is a lot of evidence out there to work from in the Western hemisphere, but it has to be collated. It has to be organized. Other words, you're just going to be picking little things here and there. You're going to be totally anecdotal. You can't get an overview. I said I wanted to do all the Americas. I said, "No way." I said, "Mesoamerica, the Borderlands, that's enough." But actually, every eco-culinary artist will have to do it from their situated knowledge. That's the idea.

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

Philip P. Arnold ([00:03:27](#)):

That's an Indigenous sensibility, right?

Victor Valle ([00:03:29](#)):

Exactly, exactly.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:03:30](#)):

Everybody can do it for themselves, right?

Victor Valle ([00:03:32](#)):

Yep.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:03:33](#)):

Europeans, or you see it all over the world and they have to do that. You did chile's, right?

Victor Valle ([00:03:41](#)):

Yes.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:03:42](#)):

Chile's is your focal point here, and maybe we can go back to that. Maybe we can start that. Maybe you can just start talking us through chile's.

Victor Valle ([00:03:53](#)):

Why chile? Why did I pick chile?

Philip P. Arnold ([00:03:54](#)):

Yeah.

Victor Valle ([00:03:57](#)):

There's two things. After I had finished the book, it's called Recipe of Memory: Five Generations of Mexican Cuisine, what happened was, I was saying earlier, I was talking about how I was raised in a family that was very much involved in practice. They were also literate. Right before I went to graduate school in Northwestern in journalism, my aunt said to me, "I have something for you." She said, "[foreign language 00:04:21]. Now that you're going to become a journalist." And so, she gave me a series of handwritten collections of recipes that went back to the 1860s in my family from Guadalajara.

([00:04:33](#)):

I began to... Eventually, I write a book from that. When I finished the book, the editor Dawn Davis, who's now the editor in chief at, I think, Bon Appétit, she asked me, "Well, what do you want to do next?" I said, "I'd like to do a book on the aesthetics of Mexican cuisine." Well, I wasn't ready to do it. It was no way was I was going to be able to do it then. That was 1996. That's how long it took. I didn't forget about it. I wrote other books, but I was always thinking in the background. In that process, I began to realize this issue of the West and the non-West and said, "What will allow me to sort of just go immediately to this non-Western reality?" It said chile. Chile is the one.

([00:05:14](#)):

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

It's an outlier, within Western gastronomy, although it's not that people aren't eating it, but when they talk about aesthetics in Western cuisine, they're not principally talking about chile. They start from the five, six basic taste. They've included umami, sweet, sour, bitter, whatever, the whole list. I'm forgetting them all. But chile doesn't figure in that. Okay, that's perfect. And so then, when I began to read the literature, not only does it not figure in that from the colonial period onward, it is a marker of the savage. The Spanish used a term [foreign language 00:05:53], food of Christians, and [foreign language 00:05:57]. They all had different ways of saying it, but it was definitely a dichotomy there of us and them.

[\(00:06:08\)](#):

When I went through, by 300 years of Mexican literature, from the colonial text to even the early liberal period, even the late 19th century, there's one of the things, the Mexicans, even when they are overthrowing Spanish colonial rule, against French intervention, they're still mostly repeating the Spanish concept. They're on the Spanish side of the ledger when it comes to their relationship to that food. In the countryside, now, what happens is Spain decides, for practical reasons, that although they were very slow to adopt Native foods, except for chocolate and corn, which is totally out of necessity. For most of the other foods, that was [foreign language 00:06:55]. It was over there.

[\(00:06:57\)](#):

But out of policy, because they realized the majority of the population that was Indigenous and mestizo, so they were eating these other foods. In order for them to work in their minds, because that's what they really cared about. In order to build their mercantile economy, they said, a matter of policy, they said, "Wherever you can, you will grow these things." They will just make it a statement, because they're being totally practical. And so, chile figures in that. I write a chapter in fact of how chile goes from Mesoamerica to New Mexico. What's interesting is the people who are agents in that are the [foreign language 00:07:33] and all the Mesoamericans. It's one of the parts of the history of the settlement or the colonization of the southwest with the huge role that the Native people, mostly Mesoamericans, people from [foreign language 00:07:45], Purépecha.

[\(00:07:47\)](#):

And then, also, some of the people from the north were sort of dragged along. The [foreign language 00:07:52] people. A variety of people are pulled up in a wave, and they're the ones who basically do the farming for the Spanish. They want to mine, they want to do cattle. They consider farming something beneath them. That's not for them to do. Well, who does it? The Native people and the mestizo people. What's interesting is that the Spanish make a deal with the [foreign language 00:08:17] that to say, "Okay. We will give you the rights of [foreign language 00:08:20], of free men, of basically minor nobility when you'll have autonomy. You'll have autonomy over your cities, and you can declare whoever comes to your city a freeman as well, if you do these settlements for us," because there was an exchange.

[\(00:08:36\)](#):

The [foreign language 00:08:38] negotiated with the Spanish for a long time. They kept on saying, "No, no." They were brilliant. They even send a delegation to Madrid, to Spain where the [foreign language 00:08:48] are talking. There's this whole process, and finally they come to an agreement. Meanwhile, the population is collapsing, and the church is saying, "You better decide something." Because the original exploitive model of the Spanish was a catastrophe. It was a catastrophe everywhere, obviously, but especially in New Spain because there the population densities, once you got beyond the plateau, it wasn't going to work. People are dying, their workforce is disappearing, so the Spanish have to make concessions.

[\(00:09:21\)](#):

They will not be the way they were in San Luis Potosi, in Peru, the way they just were totally ruthless and didn't give a crap of what happened. In northern New Spain, for pragmatic reasons, they have to make some concessions. Within that context, that [foreign language 00:09:37] arrived, and they were already known as

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

being master gardeners. They go into the borderlands. I sort of retell the whole story of chile from a Mesoamerican perspective, who was involved in.

[\(00:09:50\)](#):

But that was the difficult transdisciplinary challenge because at this period now, Native people do learn to read and write, but they're only at the service of the empire. They're basically bureaucrats. They're not allowed to... Any whiff of cosmology must be stamped out immediately. Even indirect references I talk about where people are using chile as medicine, which is coming out of the idea of hot and cold, just is basic standard Mesoamerican medicine. They would say it's witchcraft, but it's not. It's just their view of the body. It's just really basic stuff. They have to expunge that. It's like 1700s. I'm sorry.

Philip P. Arnold [\(00:10:30\)](#):

Yeah, it's biochemical. I mean, it's a healing practice. It's hot and cold, as ancient as human beings.

Victor Valle [\(00:10:37\)](#):

I know. But at that time, the Europeans, they were merely influenced by Aristotle, and there's the Galenic idea. Although the Europeans did have that, this idea of hot and cold is pretty all throughout the world. It's not something unique. That's kind of what was going on here. I said, "Okay. This commodity, which it is now in the 21st century, has an incredible history. It tells you how the idea of the other is created." This will get back to the idea of the doctrine of discovery.

[\(00:11:15\)](#):

The way the Europeans interact with the material world in the form of the chile and other native foods, and the way they bifurcate, they create this binary view of the world versus the idea of nature itself is at the core of that. That makes it very easy for the doctrine of discovery to be adopted as a technology, as a governmentality, that's what they say, because that's really what it is. It's a governmentality of empire. But for a European, they're already dividing the world in that way already. They're already seeing this. The Spanish were doing it with the Moors. They were already practicing this idea of that's the other, this is us. We're the Christians, there... This whole way of doing that.

[\(00:12:03\)](#):

For this idea of the doctrine is totally ruthless, and everything that you guys are talking about at that conference. Also, you say, "Well, why would this be so easily adopted?" When you look at food, you see it right there on the ground, people are making, and they're not even concerned with a doctrine. They're just mapping the world. The maps of intelligibility of the world are already there and the way people are handling food, and that's what's the beauty of this project, because you're always having to return to a material object. It's a biological genomic thing. It has all these connotations.

[\(00:12:39\)](#):

And then meanwhile, the other part of the book talks about how Native people saw chile, which is... That's why the first chapter talks about this metaphor, the chile, the salt, [foreign language 00:12:51]. It means the chile... I said the salt, the chile. It should be [foreign language 00:12:58]. The chile, the salt. What it means is it means all that from which we require to have pleasure in life. Europeans would say, or Americans would say, the spice of life. I said, yes, in a very general sense, but it is that metaphor within their cosmology, which means you have to understand, well, what is pleasure to the Mesoamerican body. You have to go into imagine the Mesoamerican body to understand how that metaphor works and how powerful it is.

[\(00:13:34\)](#):

Within the... Philip, you're a specialist on [foreign language 00:13:38].

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

Philip P. Arnold ([00:13:39](#)):

Not anymore.

Victor Valle ([00:13:40](#)):

Not anymore. Okay. You've gone on.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:13:42](#)):

It is resonating with all of this too. Yeah.

Victor Valle ([00:13:45](#)):

Well, what's interesting is that [foreign language 00:13:47] has two sisters, and one of them is Chicomecōātl, which is our lady of sustenance. You would think that chile would be under the purview of Our Lady of Sustenance and her [foreign language 00:13:59], all of the minions. No, her other sister has a big, long Nahuatl name, which I'm not going to say. It leads Our Lady of the Little Chile, [foreign language 00:14:11], and she has her own category. She's equal to Chicomecōātl. It tells you something how Mesoamericans, how much importance they give, and they're both sisters of [foreign language 00:14:24], the great Earth Lord.

([00:14:27](#)):

Now, you go, "Okay. This is hardwired. This is foundational." That was a big help. One of the persons that helped me was Danielle [inaudible 00:14:37] from France. At the time, I was in Mexico for a Fulbright, reading all kinds of stuff and going all kinds of places. She is writing about the present day poetics among the [foreign language 00:14:51]. This is in state of Guerrero. Everything, the way the food is served, all these metaphors still survive. I mean, they haven't gone away. They exist in a Nawa ceremonial context, [foreign language 00:15:07] ceremonial context, and these ceremonies are performed when the [foreign language 00:15:13], the ruling authorities of the village are elected. They go through a whole investiture. All this poetics of chile are there reenacted over and over again.

([00:15:26](#)):

And then, when I began to read Sahagún's... What do you call? The universal history, the Florentine Codex, I began to find all these metaphors. And then, I started to find all of the metaphors of chile, the salt, and different forms by the way. Some were just straight up the chile, the salt. Others were adjective forms. You see the way people play with language? And then I asked Danielle, "Am I seeing something?" She said, "Yeah, but no one has paid attention to it. Everybody was so tripping on the high court poetics of Nawa poetry, which is beautiful, which is important, but this is the day-to-day reality of people just talking about the mundane." I said, "No, this is exactly what I want to talk about, because this is the lived poetics."

Sandy Bigtree ([00:16:13](#)):

The actual engagement.

Victor Valle ([00:16:15](#)):

The actual engagement.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:16:15](#)):

[inaudible 00:16:16].

Victor Valle ([00:16:16](#)):

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

You're right.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:16:18](#)):

[inaudible 00:16:18] both ways, the food.

Victor Valle ([00:16:20](#)):

Right. So then, I found the story about the... What do you call? The [foreign language 00:16:27]. This is an actual, a Toltec story as retold by the Meshika. This is a story of how Titlacahua, the Tezcatlipoca, takes the form of a chile vendor, and he goes into the plaza before the Huemac, the Toltec lord. He goes there and he goes into the plaza as an Otomi. That means he goes without [foreign language 00:16:56], without the loincloth. He is selling his chiles as he is showing his chiles. It sells the Meshika idea.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:17:06](#)):

It's very racy.

Victor Valle ([00:17:07](#)):

It's very racy. This was a kind of a poem. It's a legend poem, but here, you get this incredible metaphors of their binary metaphors, the chiles, the salt. All of them are repeated, and they open little Russian dolls. Each poem, each metaphor is nested in another metaphor and another metaphor. And [foreign language 00:17:30] had noticed it. Well, this is like a fractal. What's going on here is that part of the pleasure of the poetry for the audience would have been that they know this. This is a performative aspect of the poetry, where these metaphors within metaphors within metaphors, it's just like a slide. It's like an enjoyable thing. It would be very sophisticated for us people now to think of poetry that way. But for them, that wouldn't have been such an unusual thing. That was part of...

([00:18:05](#)):

In addition to sort of telling a story of how Huemac was overthrown and the cult of human sacrifice will prevail over the cult of Quetzalcoatl, there's that whole struggle that's taking place. Because what happens is when [Huemac... I forgot to say. When Huemac's daughter goes into the courtyard and looks at the chile vendor, she's shocked. The king says, Huemac says, the emperor says, "Okay. You got to have sex with this chile vendor then, so we can get this out of your system, and then we'll figure that out later." She does. The daughter is cured. She has satisfied her curiosity for carnal knowledge, to put it that way. But then the problem is that all the kinsmen of the king are saying, "What have you done to allow a lowly Otomi onto our family?" He says, "What are you doing here? This is an outrage. This is an embarrassment."

([00:19:05](#)):

Because the Otomi, the Meshika represent them as being uninhibited, crude, lewd. That's the image of the Otomi. But they don't know that this is Tezcatlipoca impersonating an Otomi. The king says, "Okay. Well, send them out to battle. We'll give them an army of dwarfs and humpbacks. They will go against our enemies, and he'll be defeated and that'll be it." Well, Titlacahua knows that, and so he prepares them to fight. They do not take captives. That would be a stretch, that will beyond credulity, but they prevent being taken as captives, and that's [inaudible 00:19:53] as a huge victory. Now, he comes back, and he reveals himself as who he is. And so, Huemac must leave in shame. This idea of the emperor, Quetzalcoatl, who must in shame, this idea of being shamed before his own people, this idea.

([00:20:10](#)):

The Meshika are looking at it and say, "Oh, and yes, this is our lineage. This is a genealogical story that say we come from those people." It's a way of claiming their [foreign language 00:20:22], their Toltecness. But in that,

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

you see these beautiful metaphors. If I had the text, you can see how they work. He uses the word [foreign language 00:20:33]. The word [foreign language 00:20:35], at one point means big chile. Big chile. But it's also a euphemism for [inaudible 00:20:42]. It goes on and on and on. One of them is the use of the word, the association of chile with heat, the physical sensation of heat. Now, we're going back to the biochemistry of chile.

[\(00:20:57\)](#):

And then later, I show how this idea of chile being synonymous with heat was very common. I give a ritual, it's called firehouse [foreign language 00:21:07] ritual, where basically they eat these tamales. They're stuffed with the hottest chile they can get, and a little brine shrimp, and a little bit of greens. They eat these really quickly and try to get as [foreign language 00:21:21] as they can. They're literally have the firehouse is their body, in their body. They've heated their bodies physically, and they're full of tamales, and then they drink huge drops of pulque, which are cooling. Pulque is cool. It is the water symbol. Within their dietary cosmology, that is cool, chile hot. You douse the fire, and in the ritual, they're also having a fire and dousing the fire, but they're also reenacting this having the fire and dousing the fire within their own bodies.

[\(00:22:03\)](#):

You see, well, this was every day because the people who are doing this, the really packed ceremonial ritual calendar, Duran tells us, almost every day, something is going on in the valley. I mean, you wrote about that, where all these... This is just, again, ordinary. The ordinary day enactment of what would've been everyday cosmological knowledge of how the world is.

Philip P. Arnold [\(00:22:26\)](#):

A bit like a sweat in North America. It's a bit like undergoing and it's healing properties. It's also spiritual practice.

Victor Valle [\(00:22:38\)](#):

Like [foreign language 00:22:40], the whole idea.

Philip P. Arnold [\(00:22:40\)](#):

Yeah, no, exactly.

Victor Valle [\(00:22:42\)](#):

A sweat lodge, yeah. Once I found that, and then Danielle was very helpful, her work. I consulted with her through email a little bit. I said, "Am I crazy here?" She said, "No, you're onto it. Nobody has done it." At that point, a certain point, I said, "I don't know how I'm going to fit this together. How is this going to work?" That was the breakthrough. I said, "Ah." And then, once I began to see that, I began to find this metaphor, even in later text, in [foreign language 00:23:11], where he's doing his involuntary literary criticism. Where he goes, he's a Nahuatl speaker. This is now in the 1660s, I forget, much later. He is rooting out. He's using his knowledge of Nahuatl, which he speaks fluently, to go after the [foreign language 00:23:34], all the healers and putting people in stocks, making them...

[\(00:23:40\)](#):

He was doing his own inquisition without the permission of the church. Eventually, the church catch up to it and said, "No, we'll handle the inquisition. Stop it." Because he was creating such chaos. But within his text, you find all these other metaphors of chile and beautiful metaphors of chile. One of the things that happens, and he was saying these infernal idolatry, but what's happening in some of them, they're using metaphors to talk about the poetics of the chile's effect on the body, but they're talking about the neurochemistry within their medical practice but in the most beautiful poetical form. And then, people are taking [foreign language 00:24:29], which

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

is a morning glory mixture. He even tells us the amount, 52 seeds crushed into a tee, and you're drunk. It's a mild psychoactive. You see that.

[\(00:24:43\)](#):

They would give this to the patient, and then the healer would also take it, and the healer would go into... [foreign language 00:24:50] would go into a whole poetics of how the earth floored. It could be a divinity, or it could just be the chile was helping your body, but they reimagined the [inaudible 00:25:04], which is very interesting, because it's not anything like you'll see in European medicine or their idea of idolatry at all. It says they're reimagining the physical effect of the cure upon the patient's body, but in a totally political form. So, it's both... That's the conundrum that I found here too, was this idea of, because you don't have this definite clear line between what is spirit, what is matter. Matter is imbued with spirit, is lively.

[\(00:25:31\)](#):

I mean, the European language has failed us, hugely, because you can never really quite get that. That's one of the huge problems we have. Just as a side note, that's why Native languages, we have to persist going forward, because some of this can actually only be expressed in the Native language, because the problem is translation. We use words that have all these other implications, words with all kinds of metaphysical implications, which make complete sense within Western thought, but don't completely jive. I mean, sometimes they're close, sometimes they're not. That's part of the problem. Really, this knowledge is best performed within the language that created it. It makes the most sense in that language.

[\(00:26:17\)](#):

That's the other thing, that part of what I was doing here was to stop our reflex to universalize, to say, "Oh, I know what they're talking about. Oh, I know what they're talking about." Are you sure? One of the things that happens, the Spanish talk about this, they accuse the Native healers of being too empirical, which I thought, "Well, that's [inaudible 00:26:42]." Because they're so interested in the body and how it works and everything. It's like, "Wow, this is like, God, that's really advanced." I said, "Give them some credit if they can't handle that." They don't want to be infected by that. They're trying to keep that away because they would... I see that happening now, is that people are talking, decolonize this, decolonize that. For people who are invested, that their whiteness includes the colonial, the benefit of coloniality, then this is very problematic, because actually, it's forcing them to question their Christianity. Well, what is it I'm doing here?

[\(00:27:30\)](#):

Bruno Latour, I'm going to quote him in a kind of funny way, but he was saying, and you probably could give me scripture here, and he said, "Of what good are a man's goods if he loses his Soul?" That's one of the early Christian thing. He says, it's the other way around, "Of what good is a man's soul if we lose the world."

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon [\(00:27:49\)](#):

Do you need help catching up on today's topic, or do you want to learn more about the resources mentioned? If so, please check our website at podcast.doctrineofdiscovery.org for more information. If you like this episode, review it on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. And now, back to the conversation.

Sandy Bigtree [\(00:28:09\)](#):

Lose the land.

Philip P. Arnold [\(00:28:10\)](#):

Right.

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

Victor Valle ([00:28:12](#)):

No, I know what he means the land. Yeah, the physical, tangible, the...

Sandy Bigtree ([00:28:16](#)):

Reroute all the water.

Victor Valle ([00:28:18](#)):

Exactly.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:28:18](#)):

And all these herbs and medicines are growing along these streams.

Victor Valle ([00:28:23](#)):

Of all of that, what is the point? What are we striving for? So for some people, however, the payoff after death is still the reward they want. For me, I don't care about that. I mean, I would like to keep life going. I want to be returned. My ashes returned to my tree in my backyard.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:28:45](#)):

Generation right here.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:28:48](#)):

Now, we're at that point. There's this urgent need for... I mean, food sovereignty. There's all these movements afoot across the world, and I think you're making connections that are super important.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:29:02](#)):

I know we talked about the boarding schools up here, what they did to the children, and how to farm the land and till it, and just rip it up from the Atlantic to the Pacific-

Victor Valle ([00:29:14](#)):

And cut the trees down like crazy.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:29:16](#)):

And cut trees, but destroy all the microorganisms beneath the soil.

Victor Valle ([00:29:24](#)):

Yeah. There's one other chapter that deals with how... Okay. We go through all these phases through the colonial period, but one of the periods we go through too is how the 19th century, how the metaphors of chile are used in, I would say the poetics of [inaudible 00:29:44] violence, of using metaphors of chile to talk about violence upon Mexican bodies. One of the recurring metaphors is they would say, after people are, and I start with a lynching in the 1850s, this is where Mexicans are being lynched in numbers. Not individually, big groups, or shot. Then the other thing that happens here is this is sort of the untold story of lynching in the Southwest, which it has its own timeline that is different from lynching during reconstruction, during Jim Crow, which is a different story, or during slavery. That was a good story.

([00:30:19](#)):

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

Here, it's very much, it starts as soon as the Anglo settlers come into the Southwest. Now, people are reconstructing, confirming the number of lynch, and at least it's more than 500, probably several thousand of Mexicans and other Latin Americans who are lynched in California, Texas. This is in Texas, in the 1850s. What's happening, 13 Mexicans or 11 Mexicans are lynched. But the reporter says, this is an Anglo reporter talking to other Texans, and this is to reassure them that there's that zone there along the Rio Bravo, the Rio Grande. It is kind of a no man's land. Both countries still claimed it. It had not been settled as to what the border was going to be there. And so, people from Texas, at first, they settled further north, but now they want to go right up against where Galveston and that area, that part of the river, the part of the Rio Grande that flows into the gulf, well, that's going to become South Texas agriculture, industrial agriculture will get started there.

[\(00:31:29\)](#):

There's this period there, and what's happening is this guy says... Not even... They hung them up, the Mexicans in a hung up position. In that chapter, I talk about the poetics of that little story and how it's repeated over and over again. Bancroft will use this story. People will keep on repeating the story. They said not even the wolves, the lobos, which we're talking about the subspecies of the gray wolf of the plains, it's a gray wolf, a desert subspecies, a little smaller. Not even the lobos will eat the body of a dead Mexican gun because they're so infused with chile. This metaphor will appear over and over again. It's just basically, this is about revulsion. The poetics are revulsion that the Mexicans...

[\(00:32:17\)](#):

What's interesting here at this point, they're saying that the Mexican body is revolting because it's hybridized. It's part Indian, African, and they're always looking for pretext to... Again, this is all pretextual, but they're looking for ways to make the Mexicans other. And also to stop the Mexicans resisting slavery, because that's the other thing that's going on. During this period, the Mexicans are helping in the Underground Railroad. This is a southern underground railroad. People are going to Mexico. Mexico, by this point, has already declared slavery illegal, 1820s. So, there's this other agenda going on, and the Mexicans are an obstacle to that. They hold land, but also their way of doing things is problematic, so they're going to have to stop it.

[\(00:33:06\)](#):

But what's interesting is that they recruit the wolf and the other stories [inaudible 00:33:11]. The natural world now is sort of an ally of the Anglo of white supremacists. It's very interesting.

Philip P. Arnold [\(00:33:20\)](#):

[inaudible 00:33:22].

Victor Valle [\(00:33:22\)](#):

I go into the analysis...

Philip P. Arnold [\(00:33:24\)](#):

In their imagination.

Victor Valle [\(00:33:26\)](#):

In their imagination, of course. I also show how... See, since I've already explained the situated knowledges of how Native people in Mesoamerica and other places, how their knowledge of the body, of place and everything is so tightly packed and so coherent. I examined the use of that metaphor and ultimately show how, no, these westerners do not have that understanding of place. They really do hate wolves. At the same time, this is going on, there is a war on wolves. The federal government is giving bounties on wolves.

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

[\(00:34:00\)](#):

Here, you have an incoherent, it's a cosmology of convenience. It is not even a cosmology. It's a pretext, but it also shows how... But in other ways, it shows how the colonists see nature, how they envision nature, and how they envision Mexicans, Native people as just an extension of that natural world that must be dominated. It must be colonized and controlled. And so, that's what it's about. But then I also, the end of that chapter, I talk about how at a certain point, that story, that narrative, and that metaphor of revulsion is no longer useful. There's a point at which Mexican food is going to be marketed, used to market to Southwest real estate and tourism. So, there's a change that occurs that have to... There's a whole re-imagining of chile again.

[\(00:34:52\)](#):

It's very interesting how these things go through all these different ways. But then, chile will be re-imagined as Spanish. It's going to be cut off. It's going to be part of the Spanish romance. We're Carey McWilliams talked about the... What do you call it? There was a word for this. He called it the Spanish fantasy, the fantasy heritage. But what's interesting I point out is that Mexicans were also collaborating in that, because some Mexicans who are light-skinned enough who can pass or who own land have a little more vested interest, or who want New Mexico to become a state. They're going to have to wait to make the Mexicans palatable. Because you have Clay, the Senator Clay from the south saying they don't want Mexicans in the Union at all. They said, "Why do we want those southwestern cities? We're not going to be able to assimilate these people."

[\(00:35:52\)](#):

Debates we hear now, they're not new. They were much more violent. There was no subtlety of rule of law, none of that. The rule of law was kind of a suggestion, not actually something that was actually extended to Mexicans. The Mexicans had a fight for decades to have the rule of law apply to them. It took decades. I mean, up to the Civil Rights movement actually. So, that's what's going on. It's interesting how these metaphors are constantly reimagined, reapplied, reinvented.

[\(00:36:31\)](#):

And then, the sixth chapter is how a New Mexican, who was born in Chihuahua, ends up becoming the first person to, one of the first, to breed an industrial grade chile for commodity agriculture for the cannery. This is about how industrial agriculture, imagine the poetics of industrial agriculture in creation of an industrial commodity. How it does it. One of the things that happens is, in the very beginning, just to cut to the chase, the early evolutionary biologists, the first geneticists, they were the horticultural people at Cornell and at University of Wisconsin, several schools. They were talking about land races, because Liberty Hyde Bailey, I go into him a lot. Fabian Garcia was a student of Liberty Hyde Bailey at Cornell. Liberty Hyde Bailey is a staunch Darwinist, and what's his name? I mean, I forget it.

[\(00:37:37\)](#):

Fabian Garcia is also a staunch Darwinist. He's talking about natural selection in his articles, which I found nobody had dug up his articles. He's quoting from Darwin's notebooks, which are not his works, that will come published later, and are mostly read by specialists. Well, he was an academic, of course, he would be reading that. It was not in the general circulation. A lot of Darwin's early work are with farmers and gardeners in England. That was part of the gentry life. A lot of his early work is he's acquiring his field notes in England and then in other places where he does that. And so, Garcia is aware of this, and so he's going to use Liberty Hyde Bailey's method of creating a new species, which was to create as much biological diversity of a strain that you could assemble, plan them all close together, and then allow them to hybridize and then go through the crop and pick the ones you want, and then start those, replant those and replant through a whole selection process.

[\(00:38:45\)](#):

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

This is very slow, by the way. Meanwhile, Mendel's on the scene and the Mendelians in the US Department of Agriculture, "That is just too slow." I mean, that method did produce very good results. Burbank, Luther Burbank in California developed these really great plums. That's it. Now, I have to go into agriculture. It was working, it was an effective method, but it was way too long and it was very unpredictable, because you had to go through the process of fixing... You got to go from beyond temporary hybrids. RNA hybrids versus DNA hybrids are two different things. RNA hybrids are easy to create, especially with capsicums and squash. They hybridize very quickly. But to make that fixed into the DNA of the species to make it a permanent feature of that plant is a little more complicated, and there's a whole way you do it. I'm not going to talk about that.

[\(00:39:38\)](#):

They were doing that, and that's a very... But what Bailey was saying is that you need as much biological diversity as you can to help a plant adapt. If you can get wild varieties of the locale even better, because you're inheriting all that adaptive DNA that'll make the plant resilient in its own locale. He said, "Instead of trying to have these universal hybrids everywhere, what the nurseries like, because they can sell a lot, or these European varieties, which they're adapted to their locales, not ours. We have to do this. We have to find ways to, in essence, indigenize those varieties, which is beautiful, logical." But he was basically using the techniques of Native people with a little more efficiency, I would say, because this method is what people were doing throughout the Americas in their locale. They were selecting. They had been doing it for thousands of years, for at least 7,000 years, maybe more.

[\(00:40:36\)](#):

People were doing it. He just found a little more efficient way to do it, but it's the same logic. Tap into the local DNA to make the plant more resilient. So, Fabian Garcia does that. He creates a native New Mexican chile. He calls it... I can't remember the title. I don't have the book here, but he basically calls this... He doesn't call it New... He calls it native chile. that's his idea. Well, eventually by the '70s, the ag industry in New Mexico, in Southern New Mexico, most of all, we'll call this a New Mexican chile. They will take the step, but in this process, they're talking, the chiles that he was using, they were described as land races. Now, we have the language of race entering, which if it has no scientific basis for talking about human populations, why the idea of race have a basis for plants?

[\(00:41:35\)](#):

We know in classical evolutionary biology, there are no races. Sometimes, there are subspecies, which is not as common. What it does is... But the growers want to do this because they're trying to market their type of green chile as so unique that you can't get it anywhere else. It's authentic and unique. As in actually, because in Northern New Mexico, people had been growing their so-called land races since the 1600s. See? Now, eventually, by the time you get to the 21st century, the New Mexico chile industry will prevent any other chile grower to talk about their chile as New Mexican or native, and the only one who can do it are the industrial varieties. They sort of monopolize the genome.

[\(00:42:23\)](#):

But in that process, the poetics, they talk about the... What do you call? There's a word, I can't think of the term right now. They talk about the New Mexican chile has had these unique characteristics. It's a unique combination, but it is not unique because Capsicum annum hybridizes readily. These characteristics of a low shouldered, long fleshy chile, well, you find it in chile de agua in Oaxaca. Delicious chile by the way. But they're trying to create a poetics for a commodity. Whenever you do that, you have to say, "We're the only one. We're the authentic chile." [inaudible 00:43:06] counts, even though that totally goes against the whole history of the plant.

[\(00:43:10\)](#):

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

The other thing that was interesting, Garcia, when he created his, he will end up creating the genetic basis for the industrial varieties. Well, only one of his varieties actually came from Southern New Mexico. The others all came from Chihuahua, across the border. So, a little detailed. In other words, of course, you're going to do that because where are you going to have the most genomic diversity? Well, you're going to go have it in Mexico, because the further south you go, the richer the genomes are because that's where they come from. It's like [inaudible 00:43:44] where you have the most genetic diversity of a species. That's probably where it started.

[\(00:43:50\)](#):

We know now that they're pretty certain that the starting point for the domestication of chile is not in the Tehuacán Valley, which is a little north, but in the mountains below that, in a basically what's Otomanguanean-speaking area. In other words, these are the ancestors of the Mixtek and the Zapotec. These are the area where chile has a start as the domesticated variety. But this is forgotten. See, that's why in the previous chapter, I explained how the Mesoamericans are part of the story of chile. You cannot tell the story without them. Here, we have the genetic proof of that. Here, where you can't even create this industrial variety without reckoning with that reality, the genomic truth of that.

[\(00:44:41\)](#):

What happens is by the time we get to 20th century, that whole connection, and that's why... What do you call it? Garcia didn't call it a New Mexican chile. He called it a Native chile, which he was correct. That's a good descriptor. I call it a Nepantla chile, the Chicana cultural theorist talking about Nepantla. It's in between zone. I say this is a chile of the borderlands. In that sense, it is both north and south of the border. That's an honest description of the chile. It took one southern local variety, and all the others are basically, one was... It gets a little more complicated. There were actually two southern varieties, so there were 14 or there was 14 strains that he planted in the plot. One was actually local, the other was a New Mexican variety planted in California that people liked. What's interesting is that the other thing that's going on here, the shadow of all this development of industrial New Mexican chile, the shadow of how you do industrial-scaled vegetable agriculture is California, not New Mexico.

[\(00:45:52\)](#):

That is California becomes this massive powerhouse of agriculture because they stop growing wheat. They realize there's no point in competing with the Midwest. They say, "Well, what can we grow here most easily?" Fruit and vegetables. California will find a way to create an industrial agriculture based on variety, which is really, it goes against the Fordist logic of one brand, simplicity, reproducibility. Instead, they find they're also very industrial, but it's a different model. It's one that allows you to constantly reinvent the agriculture, which California does. They do all kinds of terrible things. I'm a Californian. I understand every aspect of what that meant. UC Davis and UC Berkeley are cranking out ag students and doing ag science and work in genetics. So, there's a whole thing going on there.

[\(00:46:48\)](#):

The New Mexicans respond to this situation, because they see the success of California varieties having. I even located the seed dealer. In other words, I was able to reconstruct... My approach is genealogical, so I try to make no inferences. I try to say this came from that, that's connected to this, so that we're not saying, well, this must have happened. No. We have a high degree of certainty, exactly what happened that Mr. Garcia ordered one of the California strains because they liked it. It was a New Mexican strain that came back. And then, all the other varieties were Chihuahuan strains and a multicolored strain. They are growing these altogether, and he explains the process going year by year, year by year, picking out the varieties and so forth and so on. What's interesting, going fast forward, the Chile Institute is founded by, I think, a University of Wisconsin molecular biologist. Now, we have the School of Genetics descended from Mendel, which says you can intervene in the genetics of a plant one trait at a time and design it at a time.

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

[\(00:47:57\)](#):

Liberty Hyde Bailey said, "It's technically possible but not desirable, because you're going to be throwing away all these other good traits that you actually need." They go with that, say that's too simplistic of a way of understanding genetics. So what? They have their debate. Now, he comes across, and when he's talking about Garcia's chile, he's created this institute, New Mexico State, New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, and they're going to form this Chile Institute to help the chile industry survive. He says that Garcia did this by accident, his discovery of the chile was serendipitous, forgetting that his method was Darwinian from the start. Although the Darwinians had not actually figured out the mechanism at the DNA level, their inference was completely scientific because they knew how hybridization worked and was completely predictable. And so, there's nothing unscientific about it.

[\(00:48:55\)](#):

Not only is his chile racialized using the racial logic of land races and the way they imagined the chile, which I explained in a dorian kind of critique of their metaphor, they're also dissing him at the same time as saying he did it by accident. One of this is early Mexican Darwinian scientist... I mean, that is like a double insult. Now, we're rediscovering evolutionary biology, and that's one, it's like, yeah... I'm telling that story because... Now, the reason I'm doing this, because in Northern New Mexico, the Native people, all the Puebloan communities, the Anglo ranchers, Mexican ranchers, they are fighting the incursions of the industrial chile. They're trying to keep their strains from being genetically swamped. For example, the southern strains that Garcia used, they used to exist in Southern New Mexico, have disappeared. They've been absorbed into the industrial genome. They don't exist as strains anymore. So, the stakes are high. They seem, well, fussing about chiles, but you're actually, this is a microcosm of the problem of monoculture, what happens when you industrialize and when you don't reserve enough, you don't protect the diversity of the species.

[\(00:50:22\)](#):

Nothing wrong with doing large scale agriculture, but when you do that, you have to maintain the genetic diversity. You always have something to go back to. That's what Liberty Hyde Bailey says that we shouldn't think about this universal strain for it lasting forever. We will always want to go back and change, our taste change, the environment change. We always have to be able to go back to make a new recipe of the cultivar we want to eat. But you can only do that if you maintain all the genetic diversity as much as possible. And so, in the end of that chapter, those strains no longer exist, and the northern and central strains are already showing incursions from the southern industrial strains. You see that process going.

[\(00:51:11\)](#):

And then, that chapter also talks about how they wanted to make a GMO chile, make a glyphosate-tolerant chile. Because the southern industrial growers, because they were planting chile so much in the same place, when you overplant a cultivar, you're basically sending out a signal, all pathogens, please come here. Colonize this variant because... So, the strain becomes weaker. It becomes more problems. Their solution to that, instead of making the plant more resilient was, well, okay, we will remove competition from weeds, which does help. It's a marginal help, but it is not solving the problem of overplanting in the same place over and over again. In other words... And then, you add the problem of adding glyphosate, or Roundup, is now you are hurting the ecology of that place. People don't understand that the use of those herbicides, their most obvious impact is on the ecology, not necessarily on humans. There's no strong evidence that eating these plants were going to hurt you. People wanted to say that. That was the imagery they wanted to use, but that's not actually correct. The biggest problem is to the ecology of the place of...

Sandy Bigtree [\(00:52:23\)](#):

And disregard for the soil.

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

Victor Valle ([00:52:25](#)):

Exactly. Soil ecology.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:52:27](#)):

I mean, [inaudible 00:52:27] their conversation, in industrial and agriculture, the soil is insignificant.

Victor Valle ([00:52:33](#)):

Insignificant. That's changing now. Thank God.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:52:37](#)):

Absolutely.

Victor Valle ([00:52:39](#)):

Like, oops, oops.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:52:43](#)):

But also in your story, it seems like they're trying to racialize these crops in a way that excludes the Mesoamerican heritage of these plants.

Victor Valle ([00:52:54](#)):

Yes, yes.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:52:58](#)):

So, cutting off the kind of Indigenous element then [inaudible 00:53:00].

Victor Valle ([00:53:00](#)):

Exactly. The only origin story they recognize is the Spanish origin story. They say the Spanish Oñate brought the chiles. I'm saying, well, he may have physically brought them, but the people who were in charge of planting them was not him. The other thing I mentioned is that the [foreign language 00:53:19], the Europeans born in the Americas, they don't really, what do you call it, adopt native foods until 200 years later. I had an incorrect idea of Mexican food being hybridized from the start. A process starts, but it's much slower than I had realized. The Mexican food we know now, really, it doesn't really become to exist, well, as a national cuisine till the 1960s when the Mexican tourist industry now is going to tell a story about the food, and then they're going to use the idea of the Indigenous ingredients connected to the tall text and all of that.

([00:54:04](#)):

That becomes... Now, the reality of Mexican food is that there isn't one Mexican food. They're only a series of cuisines. They're also ecologically based. Every region has its own character. But for tourism, so you have... The Mexicans are involved in this too, in a different way. They're also re-imagining, and they're also starting industrial cultivars, so they're not excluded from the process. They're just doing it their way. One of the things that's different, and this is the point I mentioned in the beginning. For the Nawa, when you were reading the Florentine Codex and they're talking about the good chile vendor and the bad chile vendor, the good chile vendor has variety.

([00:54:45](#)):

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

From the very beginning, there is no generic chile idea of... The way I'm talking about it now, it doesn't really exist that way. Everything is specific. And when I interviewed Zapotec people for the end of the book, the same thing. There is no chile as a general concept. It is all specific. Because for them, monitoring the variety is the most... Their idea of excellence is based on diversity, to say it another way. They can't really have a good Mexican cuisine unless you have at least seven varieties. At least seven.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:55:17](#)):

Oh my gosh.

Victor Valle ([00:55:18](#)):

14 would be better. You know what I mean? When you go to Oaxaca, that's what you're dealing with, the variety and the art of mixing and combining and all the different kinds of treatments. What's interesting is that this knowledge was known 3,000 years ago. They found a cave, one of the earliest caves. I mentioned the place, I think it was in El Salvador, but this was some ancient Mesoamerican. I forget who was living there, probably Maya, but whatever. There's some ancient farming community, and they have all the middens from the caves, and they found seven different varieties of chile. And then, they have all the [foreign language 00:55:56], all the grinding implements, and they see how they were used. They were saying, well, they were using chile in all these different ways from green to dried to soaked.

([00:56:07](#)):

That's very modern. I mean, Mexican cuisine is based on these multiple technologies. The only thing they didn't have was pickling. That's what the Mediterranean people brought. It's a Moorish technology, by the way. And so, they bring that. But other than that, they had all the different ways of using chile. You go, "Oh, this idea of diversity." Instead of essentially two, it goes against the idea of the essential, the perfect one. This idea, when you're looking for perfection in one thing, when you think about that, that a very essentialist logic because you're looking for some expression of these timeless qualities in this one commodity. When in fact, if you want to have really good cuisine, you don't want that. You want variety to really do good cooking.

([00:57:01](#)):

You have to have variety. Wherever cuisine you are in, wherever you are in the world, it's the same idea. You want as many choices as possible to get different effects. Well, these people were no different, they said. When you read, I read that from a cook's point of view, how they're talking about variety. The other thing they say, "It must be hot." The sense, and my grandmother would do this too, she goes, "We always wanted different green chiles to use in different ways. We would stuff them with shrimp." We had a lot of recipes, what they call [foreign language 00:57:38], which is a way... This is not in my book, but this is from my other books. We're talking about a way of making food in the really hot time of the summer. Your meal is made in the morning, and it's all different forms of pickling, and it's all these different foods which you can make in the morning and eat later in the day without refrigeration. Chiles were very good for that. They would stuff them with sardines. They would do all kinds of different things.

([00:58:02](#)):

When people talk about [foreign language 00:58:04], they realize they're only picking one version of... If you go to Mexico, you'll find there's all kinds of ways of doing that. But when she would get a chile that was picked green too early, she'd go, "[foreign language 00:58:18]." Tastes like grass, only chlorophyll, because all that you're getting in the plant. But that sense of disgust, I said, "This is so unsatisfied." This idea, you must have heat. It's like you must have that flavor profile. That only comes with the plant is mature. If all the species are like that, you got to let them grow until they develop more character.

([00:58:44](#)):

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

One of the things that I was telling you, this idea that I had already been a cook and that I do cook, and I came from people who were really good cooks. My mom was trained by Yucatecan cooks when she was living in Tijuana. She had a tortilleria, and the women are all from Yucatan. That's the other key place of Mexican cuisine for me is Oaxaca and Yucatan are incredible places, because there you have the Indigenous cuisines alongside, and there you have the Indigenous cuisine interpreting the European foods and say, well, let me borrow that. I'm going to use it over here in this. I have another use here that you had not thought of. And so, that's what's going on there. You get the sense of this idea. Although they weren't dealing in what you would call Western aesthetics or idea for art for art sakes, they had different ideas of standards. We would call aesthetic criteria of what is good.

[\(00:59:40\)](#):

That's the other thing I wanted to show, that when we talk about food as culinary artists, you have to give the Mesoamerican, the Native point of view, complete... It has to have... Its subject, its gaze must also be there, not just the ingredient. How people saw it and imagined it must be part of what you're talking about as well. You know what I'm saying? There's a subject position already there in the way people are talking about the food. Because I wrote, just to go back, earlier, I wrote a book called Recipe of Memory, and it was partly when I was working at the Los Angeles Times. I was hearing that... Then, it was the [foreign language 01:00:19], where all these cooks coming from a study with [inaudible 01:00:24] in Paris and doing the new cuisine, making the new French cuisine lighter and better. It was a good thing. They say, well, we're going to do this to the...

[\(01:00:33\)](#):

John Sedlar, a New Mexican, who shouldn't have done this. He said, "I'm bringing the best French technique to Mexican food, which is really a rustic food." I go... Some of it is. It is not completely inaccurate, but I said, "You're kind of missing something. People in Mexico live in cities, and they've been cooking and they've been writing the recipes down for hundreds of years." I said, "That's an awfully simplistic understanding." He was doing there, getting back to what you were saying earlier, he was only treating the chile as an object. It existed as an object. The one who did it was the guy at the Coyote Cafe. It wasn't John, I want to correct myself, so I don't get John angry. It was a guy at Coyote, I think it was Miller. John Miller was his name. He was only treating the ingredient as an object and not realizing it was a metaphor.

[\(01:01:24\)](#):

It already is a metonym. It already has a life within another world, within another ontology, with another discursive formation in which it already has meaning. It's carrying the meaning, and people are playing with the meaning. In Mesoamerican poetics, they assemble their metaphors from metonyms, from all these things that already have deep meaning, like salt had deep meaning, and chile has deep meaning. It's already part of the cosmology. Then they recombine it in all these other ways, and it's fascinating. You bet you can see how the poetics becomes very flexible, but very complex, very subtle, very nuanced. Well, when you treat it only as an object, all of that is gone. And so, I wrote the book. I was there working in the [inaudible 01:02:08] section of the Times. Ruth Reichl, who was working, at the time, I think she's retired, but she went to New York Times and Bon Appétit, they're talking about all these ingredients without their stories, without their metaphors, without their gazes are absent.

[\(01:02:28\)](#):

There's no accounting for the subjectification that occurs within that culture of how they treat the object. That's why I wrote the book. I said, well, I have recipes from my family from the 1860s going back that far, so there's a whole story here of what's going on. Part of the recipe was from my great-great-aunt who was a school teacher. That whole book, I talk about how she had these love letters and poems written by a liberal who she could not marry. Guadalajara's arts conservative city more than even Mexico City. It is a papal see. Here, you have the

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

battle between liberals and conservatives, and in that, I have the memoir of my great-great-grandfather who was an innkeeper, who describes the siege of Guadalajara by the liberal forces against the French.

[\(01:03:22\)](#):

There's this whole history there that wasn't... I wrote that book to say, hey, we're here. Stop talking over our heads. We can explain this well ourselves. When you talk about this, you have to incorporate our stories. You have to at least acknowledge that this is going on. That was the thing is that... And that we're also urban people. We have a history of urbanism that goes back thousands of years-

Philip P. Arnold [\(01:03:53\)](#):

One of the biggest cities in the world.

Sandy Bigtree [\(01:03:56\)](#):

No, food is our relative. We share our DNA with food. It's more than metaphor. It exchanges their life and regenerative life force into our bodies, and we process all those energies. It's much more than its detachment that the Western world acknowledged.

Victor Valle [\(01:04:16\)](#):

Well, now, unfortunately, that has changed. That has changed. When I wrote that book then, the only Mexican presence was, especially in the high-end restaurants, in the high-end restaurants in LA, the fusion cuisine. That was the thing then, was all about multiculturalism, but it was all curated by a French-trained chef. Now, that has changed dramatically. Now, that curatorial perspective isn't necessary to have high cuisine anymore, which is thankfully a good thing. That has moved on. And now, you're getting more Latin people playing the role of curators in their restaurants, not because they've been in... My wife makes a joke, a kind of a crude joke. Whenever we're in California, say, well, we're going to eat Mexican food again. She doesn't mean it literally. She's saying, "Well, who's cooking the food?" What she's talking about. That's not actually literally true, what she's saying, but what she's saying is we are always present. We have always been present. Now, however, people are beginning to see, oh, you actually are present.

Philip P. Arnold [\(01:05:25\)](#):

They're beginning to see the obvious.

Victor Valle [\(01:05:27\)](#):

They're beginning to see the obvious, and they're seeing our embodiment as a presence. That we are in conversation with them. Yeah, we want to be in a conversation. We don't want to be excluded.

Sandy Bigtree [\(01:05:40\)](#):

But it's important for people to see how the doctrines of discovery and the colonization of the earth, the colonization of our food affects our health, our soil. It's such a major connector here that we need to address how the doctrines of discovery have attacked our spirit.

Victor Valle [\(01:06:02\)](#):

Yes. Yeah. That's why I chose chile, because you have to confront its materiality, it's life. You have to confront it in all these different meanings, the different context. Yes, I totally agree. Yeah. You guys, can I pause for a second?

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

Sandy Bigtree ([01:06:16](#)):

Sure.

Victor Valle ([01:06:17](#)):

Okay. If you're going to edit this, I hope, or you're just going strictly to the air.

Philip P. Arnold ([01:06:23](#)):

Yeah, [inaudible 01:06:24].

Victor Valle ([01:06:23](#)):

All my crazy digressions.

Philip P. Arnold ([01:06:25](#)):

We've got to have a start. We've got to have a front-

Sandy Bigtree ([01:06:32](#)):

Yeah. We'll introduce you now. We've got to listen to the whole tape before [inaudible 01:06:34].

Victor Valle ([01:06:34](#)):

Okay. Well, this is front matter. You'll put it in the right position. I'm born and raised in Southern California, Whittier, which was a suburb of Southeastern Los Angeles, and raised in a Mexican family that was very much aware of its... They weren't historically important people. Eventually, my uncle would become a mayor but they were people who were aware of their historicity on both sides. On my grandfather's side, he was illiterate, but he narrated his story of his six months in the Mexican Revolution when he was recruited by one of the last surviving anarchist generals. Jose [inaudible 01:07:13]. He has a detailed account of that. Although he was illiterate, they were very aware of their history, of their place in history, of what they had gone through. From all the different, the revolution, all of that stuff. They were very aware of who they were.

([01:07:27](#)):

On the other side of the family, they had been, some had been landowners, some were city folk. They were mestizos in the sense that they were craftspeople, hat makers, accountants. They weren't so wealthy, but they were already situated with an urban lifestyle. They were very aware of that. And then, on my father's side, the women were all school teachers. There was an idea of literacy. When my grandmother talked to me, she was a school teacher, the way she talked to me, the way she encouraged me to say, "Now, what do you think about this?" And to engage me in conversation. I see the way... I said, yeah, she was a school teacher. She brought me out of my shell. I am kind of an introvert, and they were getting me to speak Spanish. That's the other thing too. They would send me to Mexico. Even though my dad was undocumented, they would find ways, okay, you're going with your aunt, or you're going with your grandmother. You're going to spend time there.

([01:08:20](#)):

That was kind of a thing. And then, I learned to read and write in Spanish. At home, I had to be studying on weekends. That's really the important, the part of my biography that doesn't get mentioned. That's the part that's really important. If I didn't have that, it would be much harder later for me to do comparative literature. Eventually, I get degrees in comparative literature in Spanish, talking of Latin American literature, and that becomes my basis for my journalism. I was already quite aware with the nonfiction, aesthetic tradition or literary tradition of journalism, what they call [foreign language 01:09:00]. There's not one, because in Latin

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

America, that form has been reinvented over and over again, but it's always is an aesthetic form. It's very much aesthetic forward. It is like Joan Didion, that the permission people give themselves, Hunter Thompson, all those people. Well, that way of giving themselves interpretive permission or the performance of the aesthetic is being crucial to the nonfiction form is I was sort raised.

[\(01:09:28\)](#):

I always said, "That is really cool. That is such a..." And then, I read the new journalist. I said... Oh, John McPhee, who I loved a lot. I said, "That's cool. That's how I want to be a journalist that way." But it took a long time because even within the Los Angeles Times, I went to Northwestern. I got my second degree, I got a master's in comp lit, and then went in journalism just to get a job. I basically did journalism because I wanted to write books. And so, I was not a trust fund baby. My family was not wealthy. I said, "How am I going to support myself?" That route is well traveled throughout the Americas, in Latin America and everywhere. Journalists, if you're not wealthy, how do you pay the bills, and how do you live by writing? Well, you become a journalist. That's what I did.

[\(01:10:17\)](#):

In that process, in anthropology, I was always into linguistics, into language theory. I was able later to keep on reading. So when I go back to academia, I've been already reading Benjamin. I've been reading the Frankfurt School. I was already versed in Steward Hall, all the early cultural studies, so that when I go into an academic setting, I already have a place to land, then do a lot of work. I've written, what do you call it, a book called the City of Industry: Genealogies of Power in Southern California. It's a Foucauldian genealogy of capital and the creation of a white capitalist, white supremacist subject. Instead of using those tools, where in ethics studies, we were talking about ourselves using those tools, I say, "No, no, let's look at white capitalism."

[\(01:11:14\)](#):

But that was based while I was a reporter, I was able to get all these documents. One of them were these FD-302s, which is the principal literary form of a special FBI agent. An FBI agent keeps a diary, and it's called an FD-302. Depending on the case. In some cases, they actually maintain a narrative. The really good special agents maintain a narrative. You could call this an occult literature, in the sense that it's the literature that the prosecutor will read in building a case, the US attorney or assistant US attorney will read in building a case. I was able to get those, and these are technically sealed records. I can't tell you how I got them.

[\(01:11:54\)](#):

When I got them, I was covering white collar crime then, because at that time, they wanted me to cover Mexicans killing each other, Blacks killing... African Americans killing each other. I knew then that I was conspiring in my own racialization, so I had to find a way not to do that. So then, I became a specialist in white collar crime, which meant that I had to learn California redevelopment law, federal redevelopment law. I had to do a lot of law to understand what are the governmentalities of privatization, because California is, we think of this very cool liberal place. No, this is capitalism in its roughest, toughest form. Sometimes, this image of California is unwarranted. I mean, for what we've achieved, we had to fight for. It wasn't given to anybody, because when you see Silicon Valley, the way they do things, their whole logic is always to be a monopoly.

[\(01:12:53\)](#):

Now, Silicon Valley uses technology, software, or actually machine technology to create that monopolistic advantage. Think of Apple, think of all of them, and they all are doing that. That's the old robber baron mentality of capital, where we're going to control everything, but they're smarter about it because they're using technology. But in Southern California, there's also the real estate industry was the same way. They were supported by a subsidy since the 1950s that gave them the money to do that. Basically, it was the financing for privatization of land. I also realized the role the railroad played. The railroads were instrumental in this whole process. People had this idea of them wanting to own all the land. No, they weren't trying to own the land. They

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

were trying to own the development trajectory. They wanted forms of development that meshed with their railroads, with their industries. They were very involved with the planning.

[\(01:13:55\)](#):

I deal with one city called the city of industry, and basically it is an economic gerrymander. There's only, what, 600 residents or 500 residents, and all of them, in some way, are in debt to either rent from the city or have businesses in the city. They're basically a privatized electorate in a privatized city. What happened there, the governmentalities, the technologies of governments that occurred there was probably one of the most concentrated forms of it, but it was not unique. This was happening throughout California. These governmentalities of the redevelopment act, the home rule laws, the joint powers authority, all these very things, and people still do not know what they are. They were driving the land process. That was when they actually came to owning the land. How do we get the land away from these people and give it to these people?

[\(01:14:53\)](#):

For me, that was very much understanding what had happened to my family. Because in both sides of my family, they had been displaced by redevelopment, or they had to fight redevelopment. As a kid, I saw them going through all kinds of distress in the family. Eventually, in one part of my family, they fought it. They used what is called owner participation, which was an updating of the California Redevelopment Law that allowed the owners of property to participate in the development, in the early stages of redevelopment. Like in San Francisco, the African American communities there, they never realized they could participate. They used redevelopment to just push them away, the way Moses did in New York. Wiping out whole working class ethnic neighborhoods. Well, my neighbor from my uncle and the whole family, they had these very difficult, very emotional meetings when everybody was talking, and then the lawyer would come to the family and they were figuring out how they're going to pay him.

[\(01:15:51\)](#):

Well, eventually, they were able to redirect the redevelopment so that my grandparents, my uncles and aunts, kept all their houses. And then not only that, they built the community center where I was married. I began to see it, but I needed to understand that more. In other words, how we can actually have some investment in place. But for Mexicans, that was always been one of our traumas, always being displaced. Even when we get land, we're pushed off of it again. That's why I identify... Well, some people right now are going through this problem. They think they have a home and they'll move.

[\(01:16:30\)](#):

Now, it's a 20th century form of diaspora through privatization, possession. So then, as my journalist, I said, okay, I'm going to focus on a critique of capital. But that's essentially, and whenever I can, I'm going to know so much about it that even though I was not a high ranking journalist, they had to rely... That's the thing I also realized too, that you don't have to be marked with a seal of approval of being the elite journalist, because there's a lot of favorites that go on in a news organization. If you own the most important knowledge or you have it and nobody else has it, and I had a relationship with the FBI agent, he would only talk to me or to one other person, then I created a bottleneck. There was no way they're going to exclude me from those stories. I learned that on, and so that's basically my background.

[\(01:17:31\)](#):

I'm, well, part of a group that won the Pulitzer in 1984.

Philip P. Arnold [\(01:17:35\)](#):

Yes, I knew that.

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

Victor Valle ([01:17:36](#)):

Yeah. We won awards in journalism for... I want two other things. This is where my interdisciplinary approach came from, was seeing how writing, academic writing, journalistic writing could be used for having an effect on day-to-day life on changing conditions. There's always been an element of my writing that is applied that I'm not... Although I am interested in the theory, I understand the academic part, I'm also interested in building weapons basically for people to use in their day-to-day lives to change their realities.

([01:18:18](#)):

In Los Angeles, you have seen that I wasn't the only... As a journalist, I was covering a lot of the reporting on the undocumented. I was at part of the generation that refused to use the word illegal. We're not going to tell them as illegal, we're going to call them undocumented. We enacted a discursive change in the journalism of that time that eventually became widespread, first in Los Angeles but then we did it there. Since my family had been activists, that's the other thing I forgot to say, one of the things that happens that I was in the Chicano movement, I was there on August 29th when the big demonstrations. But soon after, we realized that that Chicano movement, its spirit was alive, but its politics was not adequate. One of the things that told us is that a lot of our parents were undocumented, and the Chicano movement did not have a way of acting upon that.

([01:19:14](#)):

At the same time, Cesar Chavez was purging the leftists. There's a history of the left in my family and say, "Wait a minute. We always supported Cesar. We always supported..." Not him, but the workers. But we also knew that his politics was not adequate, and that amongst the Chicanos intelligentsia, they were glorifying him a little too much. I say, "Well, wait a minute. He's not really helping us with the issue it's facing now." In the '70s is when the migration of undocumented Mexicans begins, as Los Angeles begins its de-industrialization and reindustrialization. We went through the period where we're losing our smoke stack industries the way the Midwest did, but what was different about Los Angeles is it was immediately followed by reindustrialization, a new paradigm, a new post Fordist paradigm. In that paradigm, if you couldn't offshore the industry, then you brought the workers to the industry.

([01:20:16](#)):

That was this whole logic of neoliberalism, of externalization of cost. That's what you're dealing with it. And so, we were in the middle of that, and they said, "Look, all these people are being sought after they're recruited, and at the same time, they're being demonized." My family's in the middle of that, and we said, "We need a new politics." And so in the '70s, which is, I'm writing another article about this, the left wheeled developed that... They're Mexicans. They were Chicanos. They were just Chicanos who realized they had to invent another politics, and that politics becomes a politics of what is now our immigrant rights movement, which now includes all kinds of people. We were the foundation of that. And now, it's Asians, and it's the Middle Eastern people. It was very interesting. What started out, as you might say, as an ethnically-inflected kind of thing, ends up becoming this transnational universalist.

([01:21:10](#)):

But when you go back to the slogans and the understanding, this critique of the border as a technology of controlling the price of labor, that's an early Marxist explanation of what borders are for. Borders are for to guarantee different prices of labor. And at that moment, we understand that. It is just a basic. We weren't like a doctrinaire Marxist at all, but you understand, oh, that's true. That is objectively true.

Philip P. Arnold ([01:21:36](#)):

[inaudible 01:21:36] on the ground, yeah.

Victor Valle ([01:21:38](#)):

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

Yeah. And if we're going to have a politics, we're going to have to have a politics that deals with that. By the time I go to the Los Angeles Times, and I'm writing, when we do our series, we begun to call ourselves Latino, what we [inaudible 01:21:51] calling Latinx, because we realize now we had all the Central American immigration, and we were not going to be able to use that older terminology. You could be a Chicano, you could say, "Oh, I'm happy to be Mexican American," but we existed in a larger community, so you had to be able to acknowledge that we were not identical. That we could have a conversation, and that we were all working towards this goal. What happens in LA is that the politics of the City of Los Angeles, the County of Los Angeles, were radically changed by that.

[\(01:22:23\)](#):

But what's interesting is, and the state legislature as well, we bring in this sort of working class politics into the mainstream everyday life of the United States. That's why Biden, you see, there was a whole fight. The AFL-CIO did not deal with this in the '90s and not about the year 2000. Just finally, the AFL-CIO realized that they're not going to have a future unless they deal with the fact that they have to organize workers who have papers and some who don't. [foreign language 01:22:53]. That's a fundamental... That was the shift. That's the generation I was a part of. My journalism was very much inflected by how do we actually have an effect on day-to-day life. At the same time, I was very much aware that my family was a resource of all this knowledge. As soon as I could before they died, we would have meals where we would talk about certain recipes, then we would run the tape recorder and they would eat and they say, "Oh, this is..." When the food was good, they remembered.

[\(01:23:26\)](#):

And then, all these stories come out. They would talk story, and Maxine Hong Kingston talks about. Then other times, it wouldn't work. They said, "no, no, no, Manuelito." They would call out my middle name. They said, "No, no, no, that's not right. Whatever you're trying to do, that doesn't work." But that was good too, because you had to know what... My wife was really an important part of that too, because she's Mexican and Chinese. And so, she was raised with a father who knew coastal [foreign language 01:23:53] food, which is different, which is seafood, and Cantonese. In fact, their kitchen, the ingredients were divided down the middle. It was two archives of ingredients. It was two paradigms, really. That's how they had them next to each other.

[\(01:24:11\)](#):

He ran the International School of Bartending in Los Angeles, where James Earl Ray was one of his students, and he ends up becoming the guy who has a photograph of him that the FBI will use to apprehend him at Heathrow airport. That's a whole nother family of story of journalism. But the thing is that I was very aware that, okay, if I don't talk to these people, all this other knowledge is going to be lost. I did a lot of just interviews and was able to generate articles and then write a book after that. Still, even before my parents died, I did other things, which I haven't written about, but I'm waiting to write about someday, talking about cheese making and all these other things.

Philip P. Arnold [\(01:24:56\)](#):

That's fantastic. That's fantastic.

Victor Valle [\(01:24:58\)](#):

That's a very long biography. Yeah.

Philip P. Arnold [\(01:25:00\)](#):

Fantastic. Victor, I think what we'll do is we'll conclude it there, and you've given us so much. It's just like white knuckling here, like the fire hose of information and images, all kinds of things swimming in my head. So really want to thank you. I'm looking forward to you being here in Syracuse.

S03E06: Exploring the Cultural, Historical, and Culinary Significance of Chilis with Victor Valle

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon ([01:25:23](#)):

The producers of this podcast were Adam DJ Brett and Jordan Loewen-Colon. Our intro and outro is social dancing music by Orris Edwards and Regis Cook. This podcast is funded in collaboration with the Henry Luce Foundation, Syracuse University and Hendricks Chapel, and the Indigenous Values Initiative. If you like this episode, please check out our website and make sure to subscribe.