



# THE REAL HUNGER GAMES

THE AVERAGE PERSON MAKES 250 FOOD DECISIONS EVERY DAY. FOR MANY, THE LUXURY OF CHOICE PLAYS A ROLE IN THESE DECISIONS. FOR LATINO FAMILIES LIVING IN FOOD DESERTS—COMMUNITIES WITH NO ACCESS TO NUTRITIOUS AND AFFORDABLE MEALS—THERE IS NO CHOICE. AND WHILE THE PUSH FOR EQUAL ACCESS TO HEALTHY INGREDIENTS IS GAINING MOMENTUM IN AMERICA, THANKS LARGELY TO FIRST LADY MICHELLE OBAMA'S LET'S MOVE! CAMPAIGN, FOOD INSECURITY REMAINS A VITAL AND URGENT ISSUE FOR LATINOS, WHO, ALONG WITH AFRICAN AMERICANS, ARE MOST LIKELY TO LIVE IN FOOD DESERTS. HERE, A LOOK AT THE ROOT CAUSES OF THE PROBLEM AND WHAT ONE LATINO COMMUNITY IS DOING TO CONQUER THEM.

By AMANDA CARGILL  
Photographs by JESS KORNACKI

## THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

For many, this is the definition of America. It's the story we've been told our entire lives: in movies, in school, at the dinner table. Everywhere we look, we see images of an American dream that tells us that food is plentiful, children are always fed, and no one ever goes hungry. Sadly, it's a dream that is out of reach for a growing number of Latinos in the United States.

That's because America, despite being one of the world's richest countries, is in the midst of a massive food crisis. Nearly a quarter of Americans say that they have trouble putting food on the table, and it's estimated that 23.5 million Americans, including 6.5 million children, live in areas with little to no access to healthy meals. These places are so ubiquitous that they have spawned their own term, *food deserts*, and they strike our Latino populations particularly hard.

According to the National Council of La Raza, Latino children are America's hungriest, representing a shocking 40 percent of the roughly 1 million children living in hunger. These children are also the unhealthiest; research suggests that almost two-fifths of Latino children are overweight or obese. Pair this with a study that found Hispanic neighborhoods have one-third the number of supermarkets as non-Hispanic neighborhoods, and it becomes clear that Latinos are engaged in an all-out food war. The prize is mental and physical health; the stakes are the social, educational, and economic futures of an entire culture.

## WHAT IS A FOOD DESERT?

It's defined in America as a low-income region where a large number of residents live more than one mile from a supermarket in an urban area and more than 10 miles from one in a rural area. For households in these regions, the nearest food supply is often a bodega, a corner market, or a fast-food restaurant. These outlets are unlikely to accept food vouchers, and if they do, their goods are generally more expensive and less nutritious. In agricultural communities, much of the locally grown produce is shipped out of the state. The fresh produce that is available is often imported and therefore more expensive.

This inequitable access to healthy food is a root cause of hunger, obesity, and diet-related illnesses like diabetes and heart disease, all of which disproportionately affect Latinos. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, adult obesity rates are 21 percent higher for Latinos than whites, and Latino children are more likely to become obese than white children.

Finding solutions for these disparities is no easy task. Food deserts are about far more than access to supermarkets; they are the result of complex policy issues that involve socioeconomic factors ranging from a low minimum wage to enormous government subsidies for commodity crops. Despite these obstacles, Latino community leaders are taking charge of the fight to eradicate food deserts across America.

## ¡ÁNDALE!

When First Lady Michelle Obama launched her Let's Move! campaign, in 2010, she put food deserts front and center. In an early speech, she said, "Tackling the issue of accessibility and affordability is key to achieving the overall goal of solving childhood obesity in this generation." In 2011, the Obama administration launched the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, which provides assistance to grocery

stores, farmers' markets, and other retailers selling healthy food in underserved areas. The initiative is a key aspect of Let's Move!, whose goal is to eliminate food deserts across the United States within seven years.

But where the initiative focuses on incentives like tax credits and low-cost loans, Let's Move! emphasizes making change on a local level. It's an idea that has taken hold throughout the country. In East Harlem, New York—a Latino-dense neighborhood with a barren nutritional landscape and one of the nation's highest rates of obesity and diabetes—an effort is under way to revitalize La Marqueta, the once-bustling center of Latino economic and cultural life that fell into decline in the 1980s. New retail venues and fully-equipped kitchens have been built to facilitate food spaces like Hot Bread Kitchen, whose business incubator aims at increasing economic security for foreign-born and low-income people. The objective is to return La Marqueta to its heyday and provide an oasis that will bring food and jobs to one of New York's most iconic neighborhoods.

In Fresno, California—a city whose Latino population has a 78.6 percent obesity rate and twice the number of convenience stores than the statewide

average—the Fresno Metro Ministry aims to increase community gardens, ensure that farmers' markets accept food vouchers, and expand summer lunch programs for children.

## THE CASE OF WESTWOOD

In the Westwood neighborhood of Denver, Colorado, something extraordinary is happening. The area is home to 15,000 residents, the majority of whom are Latino. It's made up of laborers, working moms, and extended families—a place that as resident Patricia Grado, who moved to Westwood from Chihuahua, Mexico, puts it, "is very friendly to whichever culture you come from."

But despite the community's location within one of the country's most desirable cities, it faces staggering challenges: 25 percent of its Latino population lives below the poverty line, and 67 percent of its residents are at risk for obesity and diet-related illnesses. It has the fewest public green and athletic spaces per capita of any Zip Code in Denver, and the life expectancy of its residents is 12 years less than that of people in neighboring areas.

Re:Vision Denver hopes to change that. Launched in 2007, the nonprofit's mission is to "develop resident leaders,



Opposite page: A Re:Vision *promotora* and her daughter at the future site of the Westwood Food Co-op. Clockwise from top left (this page): seeds from a backyard community garden; a *promotora* teaching children to grow food; radishes from a backyard community garden.

the majority of the families in this community don't have a car."

Maria Coronado, another Re:Vision *promotora*, echoes this sentiment, adding that where fresh produce is available in Westwood, it is more expensive than other food. As a result, her family often ate "a lot of meat and not so many fruits and vegetables."

Re:Vision hosts free community classes that offer recipes and tips for eating healthy on a budget. Families are encouraged to attend together so that kids can learn about the origins of food and the importance of a proper diet. "It's not easy to change your culture," says Grado, but she believes children are more accepting of new foods. "They eat fruits and vegetables in school now," she adds.

Building on the success of the backyard gardens project, Re:Vision's current focus is establishing what will be Denver's first community-owned grocery store. Slated to open in early 2016, the Westwood Food Co-op will sell local organic produce grown by partner cooperatives from across Colorado as well as produce sourced from an on-site urban farm and the backyard-garden project's participating family farms. The aim is to attract shoppers from Westwood and beyond and to generate 1,000 cooperative members. For a small fee, members will own a share of the cooperative and eventually receive annual dividends. It's a model rooted in a basic economic principle: Shareholders have a vested interest in seeing their business thrive.

cultivate community food systems, and grow self-sufficient economies." Its first program, a backyard gardening project called Re:farm Denver, tasked seven Westwood families with cultivating food on their properties. In just five years, the program grew to include 400 families and 10 resident leaders (known as *promotores*). It's now one of the largest programs of its kind in the country.

"We talk about ourselves not as a food organization," says Catherine Jaffee, Re:Vision's director of communications and public affairs, "but as a problem-solving organization that uses food as an avenue. Ultimately, we look at how communities can solve their own problems."

One of those problems is access to healthy food. As Grado, who is also Re:Vision's lead *promotora*, explains: "In Westwood, there are no supermarkets. You need to travel 10 or 15 minutes to get to one. If you don't have a car, it's difficult to get there, and

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