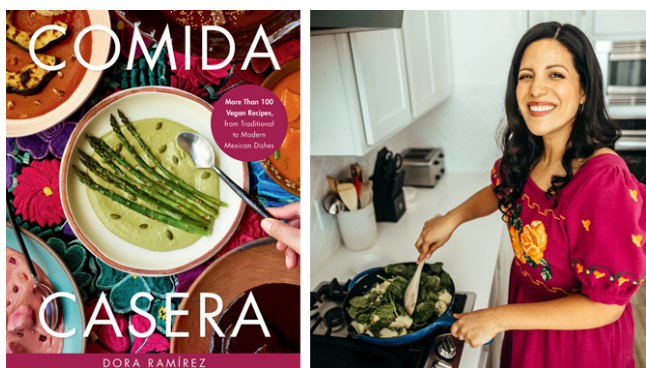




Dora Ramirez's 'Comida Casera': A Vegan Journey Through Mexico's Myriad Cuisines

By Courtney Davison
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Comida Casera, the new cookbook from Dora's Table creator Dora Ramírez, is more than just a collection of recipes. It's a love letter to Mexican food culture, paying tribute to its depth, diversity—and its plant-based possibilities. "Here in the United States we have very limited knowledge of Mexican cuisine," says Ramírez. "Usually people just think of tacos, enchiladas, burritos."

Ramírez's own eyes were opened to the breadth of her home country's cuisine when she moved to Mexico City as a young adult and encountered dishes and ingredients she'd never come across while growing up along the Mexico–Texas border. "I felt like I knew nothing about Mexico or Mexican food because it was so different from where I grew up," she recalls. When she set out to write *Comida Casera*, she made a point of featuring veganized dishes from every corner of the country. She also took care to highlight indigenous cooks upholding the plant-forward traditions of their ancestors. "I wanted this cookbook to be all of Mexico," says Ramírez.

Instead of the usual appetizer-main-side format, *Comida Casera* is structured around key culinary traditions, from mole markets to antojitos (street food), home-cooked classics, and beyond. Ramírez invites cooks of all skill levels into her kitchen, with a detailed ingredient glossary and step-by-step visual guides for essential techniques like roasting chile peppers, despinning nopales, and assembling tamales.



Hibiscus Flower Barbacoa, from 'Comida Casera'

The Culinary Institute of America–trained chef showcases the versatility of plant-based ingredients, transforming rice into chicharrones and dried hibiscus flowers into barbacoa. "*Comida Casera* honors traditional Mexican flavors and techniques, but relies on the immense world of plants to do so," she says. There's a strong whole-food focus to the book. Every recipe is vegan, and most include oil-free variations.

We caught up with Ramírez to talk about the new book (which is out March 18), the magic of Mexican food, and the fateful kitchen mix-up that made her rethink her approach to plant-based cooking. Fix yourself a plate of [Tacos de Rajas con Crema](#) and dig into the full conversation below!

Even though you grew up in your family's restaurant, it wasn't until you ventured far from home that you yourself fell in love with cooking. How did that happen?

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Dora Ramírez: [My siblings and I] would sometimes help when my father was catering big events, but we'd help with little stuff, like peeling carrots. Most of the time, we weren't super involved, especially not in the kitchen. And my mom stopped cooking at home when I was 6, when the restaurant opened. Because she was like, "Why am I going to keep cooking? There's a whole restaurant!" So I wasn't really ever exposed to cooking because I would just go to the restaurant and eat. But then I was a missionary [in Mexico City] for a year after high school, and one of my chores was to help out in the kitchen. That's when I really discovered the magic of cooking.

What sort of food were they making there that sparked your interest?

DR: I'm from Acuña, a town on the border with Texas, and the food is a mix of Texas, Tex-Mex, and Northern Mexico influences. We're really close to the town that's famous for inventing nachos, so nachos are big. In Northern Mexico, we eat a lot of meat and a lot of flour tortillas, and that's pretty much it. Not a lot of vegetables. Central Mexico is completely different. ... There's an emphasis on vegetables. There's an emphasis on zucchini flowers. ... People have a little vegetable soup to start off their meal, even if they're eating meat.

What inspired you to go plant-based for your health?

DR: I was having a lot of yeast overgrowth, infections, and rashes, and it got to the point where it was very painful. Doctors would tell me, "You need to take this antifungal medication." It wouldn't work. Then they would give me antibiotics. It would be better for a little bit, and then it wouldn't. I was just in pain all the time.

One friend said, "You need to [watch Forks Over Knives](#)." I told her I didn't want to. I knew it was a plant-based documentary. I loved cheese. I loved going out to restaurants. I didn't want to have to change the way I ate. But this friend was insistent. We were in a mommy group together, and every single week she would ask, "Did you watch it yet?" It got to the point where I needed to either stop going to this mommy group or watch this documentary. I ended up watching it just to get her off my back. I was very surprised by it, and I decided to try [going whole-food, plant-based]. I failed several times. I would go plant-based for a week, say, "I

don't see any changes," and give up. Then one Lent, I went plant-based for 40 days straight, and it was like magic. The inflammation was gone. My skin rash was gone. My pain was gone. I stopped taking all the medications I had been taking. To this day, sometimes I struggle with the yeast overgrowth, so I watch my processed sugar intake. But in general, the switch from eating a meat-centered diet to a plant-based diet resolved my health issues.

Could you talk about the comment from your mom that changed your approach to vegan cooking, as you relate in the book's introduction?

DR: My mom got diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. I'd been vegan for a little bit at that point and read a lot of books by plant-based doctors, including Neal Barnard's book on reversing Type 2 diabetes. So I was trying to get my mom to eat plant-based, and I made her vegan dishes that I really loved at the time. One of the first things I made were Vietnamese spring rolls. While I was preparing them, I set a block of tofu on the kitchen table. I left the room for a moment, and I heard my mom spitting something out and saying, "What *is* this?" She had eaten a spoon full of tofu, thinking it was panela. It really did look like a nice fresh panela cheese. It was glistening. She thought it was the most disgusting thing. I said, "Let me cook it for you. You'll see it's delicious!" She said, "I'm never eating tofu again." I tried a couple other dishes until finally she was so frustrated that she said, "Can't you just make it *Mexican*?" And it hit me, like, "Oh yeah, that's right. I *can* make it Mexican!"

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Pink Mole (Mole Rosa) from 'Comida Casera'

***Comida Casera* isn't organized like a traditional cookbook. How did you decide to organize it the way you did?**

DR: The book is organized as a journey through the key culinary landmarks in Mexico. We start in the indigenous kitchen, the basis of [Mexican] cuisine. Then we go to the market—in Mexico, there are huge markets where you can buy mole pastes—and we called that chapter Mole From the Market. Then there's street food, and home-cooked classics. ... And because I have culinary training, I have a chapter, Modern Mexico, for what I would serve if I had my own fine-dining restaurant. I wanted the cookbook to represent all of Mexican cuisine, and there's a recipe for every state in Mexico in the book.

You managed to offer oil-free versions for an impressive number and array of dishes (including chicharrones!). Why was that important to you?

DR: When I started on my whole plant-based journey, I ate oil-free, because my focus was health. But there are certain dishes where you really need the oil, from a

culinary standpoint. Mole is an example. Mole has nuts and seeds, so it already has a lot of fat, but there's a key step to making mole where you have to fry the sauce in oil, which changes its flavor. You can make it without it, but it won't have that same flavor. So when I saw that there were certain dishes that I couldn't replicate without oil, I moved back to using some oil.

But you'll see in the cookbook that even for the recipes that use oil, they use very little of it—maybe two teaspoons. They don't have huge quantities. I know a lot of people are plant-based for health reasons and need to avoid oil. And I wanted them to be a part of *Comida Casera*, too. So I had recipe testers make every recipe with and without oil. There are some recipes in the book that don't include a no-oil variation—that's because we tested them without oil and they didn't work.

How did you discover that dried hibiscus makes a good vegan barbacoa?

DR: There has been a big vegetarian movement in Mexico since the seventies, and it's not uncommon for hibiscus to be used as a meat substitute. The way I've seen it used in Mexico is as a filling for tlacoyos, where the hibiscus is very lightly sautéed with onion and garlic and then served in tortillas. In Mexico they can very lightly cook hibiscus so that it's still chewy and has a lot of texture, probably because hibiscus in Mexico is way fresher and more tender than the kind that we get in the U.S.

But I'd been to a restaurant in Dallas called Nuno's Tacos, and he does a barbacoa with hibiscus, and it is so good. He wouldn't give me the recipe, but he did give me tips. As you'll see in the book, you boil the dried hibiscus forever. But at the end, you come out with a shredded texture that absorbs flavors really well. And the hibiscus has a little bit of tanginess, which works really well with the eggplant in that recipe, because eggplant is so savory.

What was your process like for developing a Cashew Queso Asadero that actually melts?

DR: I did a lot of testing with that one. It uses kappa carrageenan, which is not a common ingredient, and so I tried to make it without it. But without it, it doesn't melt, and it's more like gel-like. With the addition of the kappa carrageenan, it really gets that melty texture. I did

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tests with agar-agar, and we tried an oil-free version that used tofu instead of oil, but it didn't get good results with the testers. It didn't melt.

In the book you talk about returning to ancestral foodways, and you describe the practice of la milpa. Could you share about that for our readers?

DR: La milpa was an agricultural practice practiced by the Nahuas. (Nahuas is the broad name for several indigenous groups.) La milpa is based on planting corn, which was their main crop, but with the corn, they intercropped tomatoes, chiles and beans. All of these crops were put together because they helped each other nutrient-wise, and they helped ward off pests for each other. It's a sustainable system. They even used the weeds—they would cook and eat those, too. Those are called quelites, or wild greens, and I use them in the book, as well as huitlacoche, the fungus that grows on the corn.

The book goes beyond the typical pantry shopping list. You explain the background and use of each ingredient. How did you decide to go so in-depth?

DR: I really want this book to be for everyone. For it to be for everyone, it needs to explain everything. That's why that chapter is so specific—because I want you to experience Mexican cuisine, really experience it, and to be able to do that, you need to maybe be a little uncomfortable and go to the Mexican store and buy dried chiles, when you've never used them before. That's why I included so much information about dried chiles, the fresh chiles they come from, where you can get them, and how to prepare them. I wanted to remove all the barriers so that people can make these recipes without looking at the book and being like, "Well, I don't know what that is. Where do I get it? How am I going to make this if I can't get this?" Even if they're not going to be 100% the way that they're made in Mexico, you can very, very closely replicate them in your home.



Rajas con Crema from 'Comida Casera'

Speaking of peppers, for the [Rajas con Crema](#) recipe, if someone can't find Poblanos, is there another pepper that would work?

DR: You can make it with bell peppers. The flavor won't be the same because it won't have that smokiness or the heat, but you can make it with bell peppers. There's also canned poblano peppers, which you can drain and use.

What else would you like readers to know about *Comida Casera*?

DR: I really loved writing the home-cooking chapter (called "Comida Casera") because I asked my mom, "What did grandma used to make for your family meals?" My mom is one of seven kids. She said, "Look, we were really poor. Sometimes we could only eat rice and beans and a sopita (pasta soup). Sometimes we could maybe afford a little bit of meat. But one thing that I can say about your grandma is that her table was always open to everyone." There was almost always [a guest] at their family meals, and usually it was somebody who needed a meal. That, to me, is the heart of comida casera (Mexican home-cooking), and the whole message I was trying to express in this book. This is my Mexican table, and everybody's welcome.