

Nancy Kleiber 1966–1975

“An army marches on its stomach,” said Napoleon Bonaparte. Like the great general, Cesar Chavez understood the necessity of feeding the troops, but more than that, he used food to bind together the disparate elements of his nonviolent army. More than a quarter of a century after my time as a union volunteer, certain aromas evoke many fond and even a few frightening memories.

I was recruited to work for the union through the San Jose boycott office after being inspired by organizer Hijinio Rangel. I headed to Delano to join *La Causa*. As a newly arrived volunteer I was introduced to the movement through the community dinners at Filipino Hall. The meals of pancit guisado, machaca, and adobo were, at first, exotic to me, and I never ceased to marvel at how the cooks managed to put together food for 50 to 250 with such limited resources. Friday nights were the best. After dinner, the songs and speeches and mingling with the caravanners filled me with the energy and determination to keep working at my often unglamorous daily assignment.

In those days, late 1969 to early 1970, the boycott was grinding on. In Delano, the work of administering the union contracts and membership programs began to separate from the organizing and boycott functions. What kept the fledgling institutions from quickly becoming a bureaucracy was, in large part, Cesar’s penchant for putting inexperienced people like myself to work on projects and then moving them to something new the minute they began to develop a routine. Mao Tse-tung wasn’t the only one to understand the need for permanent revolution.

Outside pressures also forced us to shift focus. The sweetheart contracts between the growers and the Teamsters put us on a war footing. That summer on the picket line, I felt the terror as truckloads of Teamster goons roared up to the field and jumped us, swinging bats and grape stakes and bloodying many.

But back to my theme: It was over food that I first experienced Cesar’s anger. After some tainted food at the nightly dinner at Filipino Hall had laid low a number of the staff, a couple of volunteers, including Tasha Doner and me, circulated a petition requesting an upgrade of the menu and/or cooks. When we presented the petition to Cesar, he was furious with our presumptuousness and ingratitude. A valuable lesson for me that went beyond the aphorism “Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.”

Sometime later, when I was traveling the circuit of field offices to help administer the new membership system, I would be assigned cars from the six-car fleet of slant-six Plymouth Valiants. One had a leak in the manifold that forced me to drive with the windows open no matter how cold to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning. The driver’s door didn’t latch and flew open on every right-hand curve. On another, the terrible sound in the wheels, which went unfixed despite my entreaties, became frozen wheel bearings on a dark night on the road to Calexico. While I was tempted to criticize the undependable and polluting union

cars, I remembered my earlier lessons. As Cesar said, when farmworkers earn enough to afford cars—and new cars at that—then we can talk about global warming. *“Erst kommt die fressen, und dann kommt die moral.”*

Like most volunteers, I lived in shared housing during my years with the union. Along the way, I picked up several great recipes from my roommates and coworkers. In Delano I initially shared a flat with Maria Rifo, whose dry wit and stories of life in Chile brightened the few off-duty evenings we had. From Maria, I learned to boil cans of sweetened condensed milk to make heavenly dulce de leche. On quiet Sunday afternoons before her departure in the spring of 1971, Marion Moses would share her family dishes rooted in Lebanon with Tasha and me (I still treasure the *tabbouleh* recipe). Whenever there was victory in the ongoing struggles, we’d have a feast. At one such celebration I met and fell in love with the delectable dish *birrea*. It might have been the signing of the UFWOC-Teamster truce in March of 1971—one of the bigger victories.

Who knows, if I’d stayed in Delano longer, I might even have learned to cook, but I was shifted to La Paz to work with Marshall Ganz in the administration of the field offices and contract enforcement. Living in a former hospital room left no opportunity to develop one’s culinary skills. The green paint, metal beds, and hospital smells were ever-present reminders of the souls that had been consigned to what had been the county’s tuberculosis sanitarium.

The few of us stationed at Nuestra Senora de La Paz formed an intrepid band. We were brought together by our work, yet isolated up in the Tehachapi mountains far from the main union activities at Forty Acres in Delano. We all shared meals in the community dining room, often with distinguished visitors. I’ll never forget the day that Dolores Huerta escorted Coretta King and Reverend Young on a visit. The kitchen staff put together a luncheon spread: enchiladas, tacos, creamed beef, spaghetti, frijoles a la olla, several salads, deviled eggs, and cookies. The potpourri of dishes was served up by Dolores Padilla and Sally Chavez and their daughters.

For entertainment at La Paz, Hub Segur organized a regular movie night with showings of foreign films or classic union films such as “Salt of the Earth.” Jessica Govea, who was raised in Bakersfield, showed us the sights in town, which, like all towns of the San Joaquin Valley in that era, was segregated. (One of the union’s greatest contributions was to start breaking down the racial and economic barriers in the valley.) And then there were the late-night political discussions and rap sessions spurred by the hearty fruit of the vine (the Gallo boycott would prove to be a far greater sacrifice than table grapes ever were). Of course, if we were assigned to guard duty, we had to keep a clear head, for this was the time of the threats to Cesar. All of us took turns patrolling the grounds on foot or by car (you guessed it—a Valiant). The times were scary, but our youth and idealism made us feel invincible. Fortunately for Cesar and the union, we volunteer guards weren’t put to the test.

Part of my job in contract administration was to assist with the renegotiation of expiring contracts. In this role, I had the privilege of working with David Burciaga, a patient and astute negotiator. Years later, I embarked on an unanticipated career as a hearing officer for the State Labor Commissioner's office. I was able to put to good use many negotiating techniques that I learned from David. For instance, never go into a bargaining session too hungry or too full. In the former state, everyone can hear your stomach growling; in the latter, you're sleepy and can't concentrate. The best pre-session repast is Chinese. On our numerous trips north to meet with the Gallo ranch committee to try to win a new Gallo contract, we often stopped at a Chinese restaurant in Fresno. Unfortunately, no amount of negotiating skill or preparation or stir-fried vegetables could break the intransigent Gallos, who were determined to destroy the union. After many sessions, practically the only thing agreed to was the bulletin board clause of the contract. It was a period of great frustration for all of us.

In 1973, I began to work in the Salinas field office where we had lettuce contracts. I was able to see firsthand the benefits of unionization. With the local leadership of Roberto Garcia and Ricardo Villalpando, the lettuce workers were organizing strong committees on both union and non-union ranches. The hiring hall was working well to undo the corruption and abuses of the labor contractor system. The Salinas clinic under the guidance of Margaret Murphy provided valuable and visible services to the Salinas Valley workers. We worked hard and we had fun. Oh yes, the food. Roberto's ceviche was surpassed only by his mother's chicken mole. Sunday barbecues after the soccer game. Even the pan bimbo sandwiches on the picket lines were memorable.

So it was that wherever the union sent me, whatever campaign I worked, the central gathering point was always the kitchen. The food, wine, and cerveza that we shared were our communion that, as in the early Christian sects, strengthened and bound us together.
Viva la Union!