

## La Fabulosa Fabiola: First Lady of New Mexico Cuisine

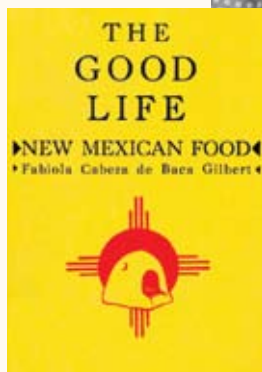
BY LOIS RUDNICK

**F**abiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert (1894–1991) was one of the most accomplished of her generation of New Mexican professional and activist women. The author of two New Mexico cookbooks and several bilingual food pamphlets and newsletters, she wrote a weekly food column for the Spanish newspaper *El Nuevo Mexicano* in Santa Fe, had a bilingual weekly radio program on station KVSF on homemaking, and worked for thirty years (1929–1959) as an agricultural extension agent for the federal government—one of the first Spanish-speaking employees in that service. Cabeza de Baca invented the u-shaped fried taco shell, and she is reputed to have introduced New Mexico’s green chile into Anglo-American cooking.

A descendant of one of the most famous Spanish explorers of the North American continent, Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Baca (whose 1535 journals she translated into English), Cabeza de Baca grew up on the Llano Estacado, or Staked Plains, northeast of Las Vegas, New Mexico, and in the city of Las Vegas. Her parents, Graciano and Indalecia Delgado, were Spanish gentry whose families had owned numerous land grants in New Mexico from the 1600s on.

Cabeza de Baca’s mother died when she was only four years old, and Fabiola was primarily raised by her grandmother and father. From a very young age, as she tells us in her wonderful memoir, *We Fed Them Cactus* (1954), she refused to take on her “proper” role as a Spanish lady. Her father allowed her to spend time with him on her grandfather’s ranch, riding with the men, witnessing the building of dams, and the tending of fields, orchards, and animals. She accompanied her grandmother, a healer, although not an official *curandera*, on her herb-gathering expeditions and learned to become an accomplished storyteller. Cabeza de Baca also collected Hispano folklore and the history of her people that she worried was fast disappearing from the modern world.

Cabeza de Baca’s family moved to Las Vegas after her mother’s death, although she spent her summers on her grandfather’s ranch, which, she wrote, she “ruled like a queen.” She attended the Sisters of Loretto school, where, her niece Esther



**Fabiola Cabeza de Baca** is at work in the kitchen in this undated photograph by an unknown photographer. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 148467. **Above left**, *The Good Life* by Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954). In the collection of the Fray Angélico Chávez Library, New Mexico History Museum.

Sanchez contends, she was expelled in her first year for slapping a nun. Her education was unimpeded, however. She attended a public school run by New Mexico Normal College, and in 1906 she spent a year in Spain, studying Spanish art, literature, and history. Cabeza de Baca went on to receive an elementary school teaching certificate from New Mexico Normal, in 1912; a B.A. in pedagogy from New Mexico Normal College (now New Mexico Highlands University), in 1921; and a B.S. in home economics from New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, in 1927.

Cabeza de Baca took her first job as a schoolteacher when she was sixteen, at a one-room schoolhouse six miles from her grandparents’ ranch. The young teacher boarded serially with

several families of her students. They were Anglo, Hispano, and Native American; spoke different languages; and ranged widely in age. She had few supplies and minimal funds (there was no money even for an outhouse to accommodate her or her students), but she managed to create a rich, multicultural curriculum. Cabeza de Baca's immense intellectual curiosity and capacious embrace of cultural differences led her to supplement the bilingual reader she used with her students' diverse cultural knowledge: Spanish folk songs, cowboy ballads, "hillbilly" songs, and "The Star Spangled Banner" were all part of her curriculum.

In *We Fed Them Cactus*, Cabeza de Baca's description of her experience teaching in a rural schoolhouse reads like a laboratory for creating civic democracy: "I learned the customs, food habits, religions, languages, and folkways of different national groups. They were all simple, wholesome people living from the soil. . . . My education was from books; theirs came the hard way. It was superior to mine." Her proud father bridled at being mistaken for nonwhite by a neighbor. He railed against the Anglo-Protestant homesteaders from the Midwest and South, who mostly failed at farming on the dry plains and overgrazed the land. But Cabeza de Baca felt sympathy for them. She praised the women's cooking, particularly the southern fried chicken and biscuits they taught her to make.

Cabeza de Baca was rightfully proud of her "noble heritage," in which she included women's work that was vital to creating civilization on the plains—particularly their vital knowledge of herbs and midwifery. Her goal in all of her writing was to preserve the best of the past (she did not minimize the violence of life in rural New Mexico and the hardships she and others endured), honor her Hispano traditions, and meet the conditions necessary to sustaining life and culture in the modern world. Thus she praised her grandmother both for her knowledge of herbs and for convincing her neighbors to give their children smallpox vaccinations. She published traditional chile recipes in her first cookbook, *Historic Cookery* (1931, 1939), but she also suggested the use of an "electric blender" for getting the meat out of green chiles in the most expeditious way.

Here is one of her recipes for green chile, from *Historic Cookery*: "Wash chile pods, snip ends. Place on top of stove, in broiler, or in oven. Brown all sides. When done, place in pan, cover with wet cloth, and let steam for 10 minutes. Peel, using



**Fabiola Cabeza de Baca** at a country school, photograph ca. 1920s, photographer unknown. Courtesy Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert Photograph Collection (PICT 000-603-0002), Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

long strokes. Remove stems. Take out seeds by holding pod in one hand, stem pointing down, squeezing between the fingers of the opposite hand. Chop, add salt, garlic, and chopped onion. Serve as relish."

According to literary historian Maureen Reed, Governor Thomas Mabry believed that as a "guide to tri-cultural cooking," Cabeza de Baca's *Historic Cookery* "would make an excellent public relations tool." And so he sent one to the governor of each state in the US, "along with a sack of the pinto beans so necessary for carrying out the recipes." Ironically, her niece Esther Sanchez noted, Cabeza de Baca did not like to cook.

*Historic Cookery* sold over 100,000 copies. Were Cabeza de Baca alive today, she would likely consider herself part of the "locavore" movement. She rightfully touted the healthiness of traditional Hispano foods—chile, beans, purslane, goat cheese, and whole grain cereals. In her work as a food agent, she mediated judiciously between the federal government's desire to force modern ways of cooking and eating on rural Hispanos. She introduced the pressure cooker and new methods of canning, but she preserved the "old ways" that were quite good enough, and that meshed with both the cultural desires and the nutritional needs of her clients. In order to better serve the Pueblo and Hispano communities spread over hundreds of miles of northern New Mexico that she traversed, she learned the Tewa and Tiwa languages.

Cabeza de Baca's second cookbook, *The Good Life: New Mexico Traditions and Foods* (1949), may have been the first of its



**Fabiola Cabeza de Baca** (top stair, far left) with home economics students in El Rito, photograph ca. 1928, photographer unknown. Courtesy Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert Photograph Collection, (PICT 000-603-0014), Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

kind to place recipes within the historic and cultural contexts out of which they grew (the recipes don't begin until page 45). In her introduction to the book, Ina Sizer Cassidy discusses the importance of knowing the people who consume the food in order for readers to understand its full significance. In *The Good Life*, Cabeza de Baca invented the Turrieta family, who lived in an isolated rural village in northern New Mexico. She takes us through the seasons—drying red peppers and making *ristras* in the fall; following the local *curandera* as she recommends pennyroyal for tonsillitis, but seeing the doctor for diphtheria. She carefully describes the preparation of bowls of *pozole*, *carne con chile*, macaroni with tomatoes, mashed potatoes, and roasted mutton for a wedding feast, and she explains the penitente and *santero* traditions when she observes the family preparing for Easter.

The recipes reflect Cabeza de Baca's description of herself as both Spanish and American. They are an amalgam of the different cultural and gustatory influences that have made up

New Mexico's history: Aztec nixtamal flour for tortillas; Anglo-American shrimp cocktail; Hispano *carne con chile colorado* (meat with red chile); and the hybrid *ensalada de aguacate* (avocado salad) for a side dish.

Cabeza de Baca eloped with Carlos Gilbert in 1929, when she was thirty-five. Gilbert was a successful insurance agent and active member of the League for United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the most prominent Hispanic civil rights organization of the mid-twentieth century, founded in 1929. (The Carlos Gilbert Elementary School in Santa Fe is named after him.) Because Gilbert was divorced, Fabiola's father severely disapproved of the marriage. He may also not have favored LULAC's emphasis on Mexican American, rather than Spanish American, identity. Cabeza de Baca was an officer in the organization, but as a woman, she could not hold a leadership position. Their marriage seems to have lasted little more than a decade. Fabiola used her married name on her two cookbooks but not on her 1954 memoir.





**Fabiola Cabeza de Baca** is second from left at the ten-year anniversary banquet of La Sociedad Folklorica de Santa Fe, at La Fonda Hotel in Santa Fe, 1945. Folklorica founder and author Cleofas Jaramillo is third from right. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 009928.

Being a woman seems not to have stood in the way of Cabeza de Baca's myriad accomplishments. Nor did a serious injury: a train struck her car and one of her legs was amputated in 1932. Her accomplishments include active membership in La Sociedad Folklorica de Santa Fe, an organization that included forty Hispana women who preserved Spanish culture, traditions, and folklore; establishing eighteen nutritional training centers in northern New Mexico villages; representing UNESCO in Mexico, in 1951, where she set up a home economics program for Tarascan Indians in Michoacán; and training Peace Corps volunteers in the 1960s. She was awarded the US Department of Agriculture's Superior Service Award and the National Home Demonstration Agents Association's Distinguished Award for Meritorious Service. Fabulosa indeed! ■

**Lois Rudnick** is professor emerita of American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston and a resident of Santa Fe. She is the author and editor of numerous articles and books on New Mexico's artist and writer communities, including *Mabel Dodge Luhan: New Woman, New Worlds* and *Cady Wells and Southwestern Modernism*. Her latest book, *The Suppressed Memoirs of Mabel Dodge Luhan: Sex, Syphilis, and Psychoanalysis in the Making of Modern American Culture*, was published by the University of New Mexico Press in fall 2012.

### Suggested Reading

Fabiola C. Gilbert. *Historic Cookery*, 1931, 1939. Republished by Ancient City Press, Santa Fe, 1970. Both dates are listed for the publication of Cabeza de Baca's first cookbook. It was first published as a pamphlet in 1931, which may account for the different dates.

*The Good Life: New Mexico Traditions and Food*, 1949. Re-published by the Museum of New Mexico Press, Santa Fe, 1986.

*We Fed Them Cactus*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954. Re-published in 1994, with an introduction by Tey Diana Rebolledo.

Maureen Reed. "Making Homes in a Changing Land," in *A Woman's Place: Women Writing New Mexico*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005.

Virginia Scharff. *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West*. Berkeley: University of California, 2003.