May Rosenthal Sloan  Welcome to the latest episode of the Cultures in Crisis Podcast Series, ‘Preservation by Design’. My name is May Rosenthal Sloan, and I am the co-curator of the V&A’s upcoming exhibition, ‘Food: Bigger than the Plate’. And, I’m joined today by Sophia Casarin, who is the co-founder of TAMOA, welcome.

Sofia Casarin  Thank you, thank you.

MRS  So, to start with could you tell us a little bit about TAMOA, and what the project is?

SC  Sure, yes. So, basically TAMOA, is a commercial project, that connects families of farmers that grow heritage maize, and we connect with restaurants and shops in Mexico, and abroad. So, in essence, that’s what we do, but of course we’re driven by so much of Mexico’s heritage.

MRS  Can you tell me a bit more about what drives you?

SC  Yes, sure. Well, the project started with Francisco Musi, my partner and co-founder in the project. He’s been in the restaurant sector and the food industry all of his life, and he was working at a Mexican Restaurant abroad and wanted to make tortillas in-house. And, while sourcing for a project he realised of the immense issue that we’re going through in Mexico, in the country with heritage corn, heritage maize. Basically, it’s been replaced by other seeds and there is an issue with the abandonment of crops and migration flows. And, well, there’s many issues in the countryside, but basically what was driving it is what maize means to farmers, and what maize means to cultural heritage, or even – I don’t want to say specifically national identity - but regional identity, or historical identity, rather than a nationalistic approach to it.

MRS  Could you explain a little bit about the importance of maize in, well, I suppose Mexican Cultures, rather than culture, about how important it is in terms of cultural heritage?

SC  Well, historically, initially Mexico is considered through studies the centre of origin and domestication of maize. So, the oldest fossil was found around 8000 years ago in the Valley of Tehuacán bordering Oaxaca. So, the history is enormous, and I would say that the most important link between today and Mexican culture is in its food. So, tortillas are probably one of the basic elements of Mexicans’ diet, and the richness of Mexican cuisine is rooted in this product. So, I think that that would be sort of like the straightforward answer, but it’s much more, so much more than just food [laugh]. It’s such a social, religious, traditional element to families, and to communities, the way the houses are organised, or even the architecture of houses, it’s set-up in a way to think about where the corn is going to dry, where the corn is going to be hand shelled, or the nixtamal is going to take place. Where the tortilla is going to – I mean, the whole – the organization of the space, and the dynamic, the relationship dynamics within the community, within the family, within the partners or couples. I think it’s a thread, it’s a common thread in every single aspect of the farmers life.

MRS  And, is that the case outside of farming communities as well, does it have a kind of broad significance in those terms?
Of course, because of food, and because what the Mexican cuisine means to Mexicans. In the city it doesn’t have such a heavy impact because it is not grown, and it is not transformed either, and the way that you would get a corn-based product is through the tortilla in your house. So, people in the cities go buy already made tortillas from Tortillerias, or to supermarkets or restaurants. Unfortunately, the tortilla - the quality of this tortilla - has changed drastically in the last decade or so, so that’s also something that we’re really passionate about, is what are we eating in the city and what heritage corn allows, you know, for that to improve in the city.

So, it sounds like your approach to the preservation of cultural heritage in a sense takes many forms and works across the food system in a way. So, it’s about farming, but it’s also about food, culture, and it’s something that links those things. Is that a fair…?

Yes, yes, certainly. I mean more I think that the priority that with the project we want to create, we want to provide an opportunity for farmers, a market opportunity for farmers for what they do, which is currently quite marginal. Also, a new generation of farmers. Most of the younger generation do not want to become their fathers or grandfathers, and they prefer to work at a nearby store, or migrate to the North. And, it’s not that, you know, that the idea is for them to stay, but the idea would be for it to an option.

Yes, sure. Through working with the artists and designers who we’re collaborating with on the food exhibition that’s one of the things that we keep coming back to; this view of agriculture and farming as either something that’s very kind of romantic and nostalgic and very much attached to a sense of the rural idyll, or something that’s monolithic and faceless, and all about corporations. And, that there’s often not any public engagement with the idea that it could be anything more adaptable, or that could cover different peoples’ perspectives, and you know, motivations.

Yes.

Do you think that’s something comparable in Mexico?

Yes. For sure, I think talking about heritage, maize as a heritage, corn, one definitely end up talking about something really romantic, because it is actually quite romantic, it’s beautiful, it’s quite deep, you know. Many of the conclusions from most of the farm workers that we work with, when you ask them, what does this, you know this maize mean to you? And, across states and across communities the answer mostly ‘it’s life’, so it’s – it’s quite romantic. But this weekend where we were participating in the UK growing lab some of the farmers, wheat farmers, brought this idea of ‘we’re not farmers, we’re food producers’, and I really liked that – and I’m really eager to to go back to Mexico and sort of develop more on that idea because I think it’s a sort of empowerment to people that are producing food. And, it’s – you know, and also the stereotype of farmers in Mexico is, it’s just quite terrible. And, to present them with the opportunity of feeling that they’re part of something that has a bigger impact to other societies, or other communities. I think it’s – it’s beautiful and yes.

So, redefining the role according to their own… Identities as well?

I think so.

I mean, with TAMOA we don’t want to put the big badge of we are ‘preserving’, because we’re not we’re contributing to the preservation, and we are contributing to the improvement of food producers and farmers and families in many rural areas who are committed to their seeds, and who have, you
know, inherited their seeds generation after generation and after, you know, an incredible act of cultural resistance they continue to so their seeds which is quite impressive, because there’s absolutely no incentive and, yes.

**MRS** Can you explain why the sewing of seeds in that way is an act of cultural resistance?

**SC** Yes, so the answer has many strings. There’s a historical one of the social stereotype, then you have a political one of a lack of good policies that support smallholder farmers. Then you have the economical, you know, the NAFTA trade and the offering of new seeds with all the green revolution in the industry. The idea of progress that has come with new seeds, and technological packages that include pesticides, fungicides, fertilizers et cetera.

So, after all of this they continue to grow their heritage seeds, it is just such an act of resisting. Many of the seeds were given away, many of the governmental programs gave out money away in exchange for many of these practices. The opportunity of — of leaving, you know, of abandoning your crop and just moving somewhere else, or working in another industry is just so easy, and so much better. There’s no incentive really than this cultural connection and subsistence of course. So, yes, I consider it an act of resistance because of these things, yes.

**MRS** So, operating within a system that doesn’t provide motivation to try and preserve that culture?

**SC** Exactly.

**MRS** And, can you tell me more about your role in TAMOA and how that actually works?

**SC** Yes, sure. We’re a small team, Francisco founded the project, I joined after. For him it was natural, you know, he was in the food sector, so it was a more natural thing. I am an art historian and a curator, and I actually studied here in London at Goldsmiths a program called Arts and Politics. So, my interest was — I would say that it was a — it’s an obvious and non-obvious relationship to the project, in one hand I’ve always worked in contemporary art, and I have an interest in social engaged practices and public art.

But then corn is just all of those - or maize, or what maize means in Mexico. So, I moved back to Mexico with Francisco, and we started traveling. So basically, we just, you know, took a car — you know, grabbed a car, and just drove in the countryside looking for maize, and looking to meet farmers that grow heritage varieties. And, it was there that I realised that I just didn’t want to accompany Francisco on his travels, but I wanted to be part of the project.

So, at the moment, now I guess my role is more, I am more responsible towards institutional relationships, communication, and there’s a lot of amazing NGOs and activist organizations that are promoting heritage grains and they’re against the GMO sewing in Mexico - which is illegal at the moment, thankfully. Thanks to all of this class action demand. So, I think my role is more on the cultural institutional side, and Francisco is more of the business side of it you know; actually talking to restaurants, he knows the language, and — and you know matching varieties, matching farmer capacities in every sense.

You know, quantities, varieties, applications et cetera to consumer needs, so he is more on the business side, and I am more on the cultural institutional side of it.

**MRS** And, I’m interested in how farmers, or producers of food respond to the project.

**SC** You know, we were very cautious at the beginning, because, farmers have been promised so many things year after year. So, we didn’t want to come with this — we were so excited of what we had in
mind, but we didn’t want to tell them, you know, like, this is what we want to do, where we want to –
you know, we were very limited with our excitement because of that. We were just cautious and – and
we started developing relationships slowly.
So, we approached the community, most of the time we found a sort of community leader that has
taken many of these roles of motivating and promoting heritage grains, and it’s through him, or
through her that we start the conversation. Start meetings start, you know organising meetings with
the farmers of each community. And, it starts as a discussion on why are we doing what we’re doing,
and why are you doing what you’re doing. And, yes, so the relationship starts very slowly.
And, then after – if we think we’re ready to start a business relationship, basically we all meet in a
group and all the farmers say what they’re capable of producing in terms of land and yield, what they
can offer. So, basically, as a group they can offer, or as a community they can offer let’s say five tons, or
ten tons of maize. And, then we can see, you know, what’s the ideal match, you know, with which
restaurant locally, or abroad.

MRS  And, have you – I mean, do you ever get met with suspicion by people who have been promised a lot?

SC   Of course, of course, all the time and it’s so valued.

MRS  How do you sell the project?

SC   I try to just explain it as I am explaining it to you. You know, I don’t farm, you know, I’ve never farmed,
or sewn any corn. I am deeply interested in the relationship it has with the country and with people. I
think it’s important to preserve – well, I guess I start sharing why I think it’s important to preserve
seeds, and there’s usually a point where we share the same idea. And, I guess it’s through there that I
sort of work out the suspicion. And, honestly, it’s actions that really prove the suspicion wrong.
So, after the first sale, basically, the relationship changes, because you know they’re like ‘oh they were
not lying, they were actually come and buy our surplus production’. ‘Oh, they’re not lying they’re really
interested in the seeds’, and we have taken many of the restaurants that buy corn from us back to the
communities. That exchange is certainly something very important to us, both ways. So, the meet
at the end part where they meet the person and we share with them where and how, and you know,
what are they using it for, what recipes, what dishes, something maybe they’ve never tried in the
community. So yes.

MRS  And in terms of kind of, well, certainly preserving but also promoting culture, when you get to that
end of the project in the restaurant setting side; are people interested in where the corn has come
from. Is this part – does this become part of the – the restaurant’s narratives?

SC   Definitely, I mean, unfortunately for restaurants to buy maize from us it’s expensive. So, it ends up
being part of a marketing strategy for them. Some more truthful than others, you know, others just do
it for the marketing and others are generally interested in the product, and then the marketing is just,
you know...

MRS  A bonus?

SC   Exactly, of just, you know, a reflection of their commitment, or… The final consumer certainly, I mean, I
think many are interested but I would say that the majority have no idea what’s going on even in
Mexico. It’s really sad the lack of information that there is on the process, and on the current
landscape, on the political and social landscape. So, all the time, you know, my family members,
friends, people have no idea what I’m telling them. ‘What? we import corn from the United States?
What, the tortilla next to my house it’s not made out of Mexican corn, or it’s not nixtamalized? Or, what is nixtamalization? And, you know...

MRS Could you explain that?

SC Yes, sure. So, basically tortillas are made through this ancient Meso-American process called nixtamalization, in which, dried grains of corn are cooked in an alkaline solution and water. So, this solution can be made with limestone, that is cooked for about a week to make Cal, so this Cal is what you cook corn in, you cook for about 30 minutes, depending on the hardness of the grain. Then you leave it to rest overnight, or a little bit more, 17 hours or so, and then you rinse the nixtamalized corn. And, you grind it, and you get masa, and that masa is what you use to make tortillas. Some people hand press them, or now, you know, they have industrialised tortilla machines. But yes, this process has been lost, so people are using refined corn flours that don’t fully include this – this process, and probably using other corn varieties that are not, you know, heritage, or native.

MRS And, I know it’s just one example of the many things that you’re trying to save and promote. But why is that process important?

SC So this process is essential because it makes corn more nutritious and more digestible. So, there are studies that have proof that, you know, the Meso-Americans the ecosystems of this region is highly linked to this process. So, corn on its own is not as nutritious, so this process allows for a better diet. There’s also some amazing studies that talk about the ‘Pellagra Disease’ in Europe. So, basically the Spanish – when the Spanish came to Mexico if they hadn’t have thought it was a completely primitive thing to do, you know, cooking stones with your corn, and would have taken it back to Europe, or back to Spain, let’s say, they would have avoided a big death toll because of the Pellagra Disease. And, this is because of the niacin deficiency. So, the nixtamalization process provides this – these high level of niacin.

MRS It’s so fascinating, an example of how that sense of modernity and progress can sometimes the very opposite of that.

SC [Laugh] exactly. Progress is not really progress [laugh] yes. Yes, so that’s why it’s so important, because it’s quite nutritious. And, quite historic as well, and traditional, and culturally – and culturally related to – to heritage. Right, so an intangible element of food heritage in Mexico. So, there is an enormous lack of information and knowledge, yes.

MRS I mean, just for you know anyone listening who might not have a lot of background in this kind of subject, could you give us a bit of information about why it is important that Mexican corn gets used in these processes or...

SC Of course, well I think, I would say that there’s many ways, I mean, I’ve talked with a different profile of people about this, and there’s always one thing that they could be interested in. So, first of all, its heritage, corn is much more nutritious than hybrid GMO. Heritage corn has more flavour, has more applications, more culinary applications. Third the enormous history that – you know, that you have behind the end part. So, when you eat a tortilla, a taco made with a tortilla, made from heritage corn, you’re basically eating an 8000-year-old tradition. So, historically it’s quite important for, I think, farmer’s self-sufficiency.
You’re allowing farmers to be self-sufficient in their communities, and Mexico’s food sovereignty in general. So, either – if you’re interested in politics, or social issues, or nutrition or flavour, I think there’s a wide range of reasons why we should be eating our own, yes, local grown crops.

MRS Could you elaborate a little bit more on why the import of corn from abroad has an impact on farmer’s self-sufficiency and food sovereignty?

SC So, basically, it’s subsidised. So, after the NAFTA agreement was signed, and later on – it’s much cheaper to buy corn from the United States, than to buy from local farmers. So, the repercussion of this is farmers are not being able to find market opportunities for their surplus production and abandoning their crops. So, farmer self-sufficiency, so basically, they’re abandoning their crops and taking other jobs, and eating other things as well, because the main reason why farmers grow their seeds is for self-sufficiency, self-consumption for their families.

MRS And, presumably, I mean of course that has a huge impact on the cultural heritage of Mexico. But I imagine in terms of the biodiversity and the global impact that, that’s a really big issue as well.

SC I would say if there was one problem, I would like to highlight it’s homogenisation of corn. People thinking of one colour, one shape, one variety. And, this open economy has allowed for that, right. Not that I support a closed economy, but particularly in the case of maize it has allowed for a single view on a single maize. And, that has an impact on the views of biodiversity, certainly. Mexico today has about 64 different heirloom varieties, and thousands of soft varieties. Many of these are in the risk of extinction because of all the aforementioned issues, and yes, and many of them continue to be sewn for family consumption and tradition, and culture.

MRS But if you don’t have people taking on new generations of food production... Then those things die out.

SC Exactly. Right.

MRS In terms of looking at the people who you work with at the moment, the restaurants, the farmers. Can you tell us anything about how those relationships are evolving and how – are you able to look back on people you’ve worked with early on and see how the relationships are forming?

SC So, for instance our first Europe client, it’s a UK client, and it’s Tacos El Pastor. They go to Mexico very often, and I think they’re coming soon next year, so we’re trying to take them again to revolve that. But our project is quite young, so we started about three years ago. So, I’m actually eager to see how this relationship will evolve.

MRS And how closely do you stay in touch with the farmers, in particular, that you work with?

SC Well, Francisco travels at least once a week to some of his communities, so he has a much more direct relationship. I like to go at least twice a year to each of the communities. Personally, but Francisco, yes, he’s picking up corn and you know looking at quality. Also, very important the quality of seeds right, so there’s a lot of – because we are actually exporting maize, we have to sound out on certifications. So, because we export corn, we have come across other different country regulations on importing these sort of products, and one of them is mycotoxins. So, Europe and the US have, of course, no tolerance on mycotoxin. But in Mexico it’s not regulated so this has also allowed us to share this information with farmers. And, it has improved the way they’re storing the corn. They way they are controlling humidity in their storing and even harvest times.
Because it’s – it’s you know, it’s harmful to the body these mycotoxins. So, there’s different types, but one of them they’re mostly linked to carcinogenic toxins.

MRS But it’s really interesting and actually thinking about the – and again it’s back to that link between the ecological or the cultural scientific relationships in cultural heritage - all kind of packaged up into one food stuff. I wonder if you can tell me a little bit more about the sorts of farming methods that the producers you work with tend to use. I mean is there a…?

SC There is a very ancient and traditional farming system crucial to Mexico’s heritage as well, food heritage which is the Milpa System, and what it is, is species being grown in association with other products. So, its companion planting, and for maize it’s crucial because the companion product such as beans, squash, herbs, have a specific function and it allows for all of them as a group to grow much better. So, for instance the beans provide nitrogen that modern fertilisers would provide, squash for instance, prevents erosion on the soil, many of these herbs have medicinal or gastronomic purposes. So, the Milpa System of course, what it provides it’s a full diet for farmers, so they don’t have to get anything else. Basically, it’s a perfect – it’s a perfect scientific finding, ancient that allows for full diet. But of course, in modern, you know, agriculture it doesn’t work, you know, it’s not a system that prioritises yield and performance and productivity and… So, the farmers that we work with, some of them continue to grow in a Milpa System and some of them have turned to the industrial monoculture - mono-agriculture.

MRS This is really interesting, but you don’t have the kind of the limits in terms of the types of farmers, or types of agricultural production that you want to work with.

SC I mean at the moment we’re really trying to not think about a single farmer, but like a community. You know, what can the community do as a whole, or a cooperative, or as a group. So, if one can provide, I don’t know, half a ton, and the other farmer can provide two tons that’s okay, you know, so they work together to meet the objective. Of course, we highly motivate the Milpa System. In the very near future we will be working also with chillies and with beans. So, we’re not focusing just maize. So, this Milpa System that is highly valuable and impressive and amazing.

MRS I wonder how the Milpa System whether you can see the impact of that on cuisine as well. Presumably, those things growing together has an impact of what gets cooked with them.

SC Of course, I mean the recipes are endless, and I guess, I think I would like to say that there is room, I mean where there is so much necessity for preservation of these recipes and these dishes. There’s also so much room for innovation and that’s what I sort of realised also this weekend in the UK Grain Lab that many of the bakers have told us, you know, what we’re doing, yes, of course we’re preserving an ancient craft, or we’re bringing back these ancient techniques that are heavily linked to cultural heritage of our country. But we’re really making the process, we’re adapting ourselves to climate change and to new recipes, and new forms of eating, and I think that the tradition has to evolve but in a positive way.

So, we need chefs to be more curious on the Milpa System, we need to, you know, for cooks to be thrilled and looking at new ways of combining this product. So, I think there are some amazing ones for sure, but there’s definitely a capacity for much more.

MRS Yes, that’s really interesting, and actually very much chimes with a lot of the artists and designers, and chefs and scientists who we’re working on the food exhibition.

SC I can imagine yes.
And that idea that the modern food system that we have, which has its roots for the most part in the 19th Century and the industrialisation of first Britain and then the world. It did many really amazing things, but it isn’t working as well as it should for most of the people who it needs to serve. Right, and so what so many of the projects that we’re looking at do is to critique that moment of industrialisation and what’s come since then. But then rather than to say we must all go back into our pre-industrial idealised past which, you know, we have to be careful not to be romantic about...

Right, of course.

We can learn those lessons from a pre-industrial system and apply them to new technologies and a changing adapting cultural landscape as well.

And definitely, thinking about a new, sort of like a new form, you know, like a new tradition.

A new tradition that acknowledges and learns from the past, including its mistakes.

Definitely, you know, and I guess what I take back from this UK trip was, is still ticking, it’s these similarities between tortilla and bread, and in all of its levels. Like, anthropological, scientific social, culinary, I mean I have to do so much research, I mean I want to, not I have to, I want to. On – on the racial issues on the whiter bread, or the whiter tortilla, the whiter corn.

Could you elaborate on that, or have you not done enough research yet?

Yes, I’m scared but I’ll try to say what I’ve kind of found out, you know, these last few days. So – well, firstly in Mexico in many of these communities that we work with I have heard from farmers this, ‘so why, why do you have yellow or white corn, what happened to your blue, what happened to your red, your pink, why do you have less, why are you sewing of this kind?’ They say ‘No, because it has less use it just, I mean we only use it for this amazing Atole that is ceremonial or ritual, or for celebration purposes’ ‘And, why are you focusing your nixtamal on your tortillas only in this way?’ ‘Well, because it’s the demand and tracing that many of them have spoken about these wider tortillas to become wider as a person, and this amazing blue varieties, or purple varieties are not providing this whiteness.’ This also links to additives; industrialised tortillas offers like bleachers. That by the way are called ‘improvers’, or for improvement purposes. So, obviously, a very terrible...

It’s a very loaded term.

Yes, it’s a very loaded term to say that it will ‘improve’, right? So sharing this experience here in the UK I have heard from – especially from SOAS in their ‘Anthropology of Food’ forum was they’ve – they’ve mentioned that, yes, in Europe and in the UK, there is this ‘whiter bread’ history as well. It relates also to affordability, and, of course the today it has changed, right. So, whiter bread is for people that cannot afford darker bread. It’s just – it’s very interesting all these similarities, and then differences, and yes, you’ve got to research more on this.

Can you tell me a bit more about your visit to the UK Grain Lab?

Of course, so we had actually four – four participations here in the UK, so our first one was – and all this was done through the V&A Culture in Crisis Programme - which we’re very thankful and grateful for inviting us. But the first one was at the food forum, at SOAS University, it was mostly a space with
– a forum with students and with professors of the anthropology of food program. And, it was very, very fruitful, and very engaging conversations with amazing feedback.

The second participation was here at the V&A for the Day of the Dead Festival, and it was a massive event, I mean I don’t know I think like more than 6000 people came to the event. A lot of children, and we did sort of a workshop, we walked through the steps from harvest to tortilla making and it was a very engaging hands on – a lot of children. So, showing that diversity in colours was very important, because most of the children that showed up, told us, you know, we’ve only seen yellow and white. ‘Is this dyed, is it – you know, did you paint the cobs?’ ’No, it’s – you know, it’s naturally this colour’. So, it was really – it’s a very visual act, but it’s very subtle and very simple. But I guess what’s behind is it’s showing that there is biodiversity.

So, our third participation was at Primary in Nottingham, this really amazing space for artists residency exhibition program, public program where we did a talk on these various things. A talk on the history of maize, and nixtamalization and what are we as TAMOA doing about it? And then after that the UK grain lab organised the Small Food Bakery, also inside of Primary. It was a two-day full program event that got together many bakers, millers and farmers in the UK, and other places. There were people from Australia as well, and other countries.

And, I guess it was an amazing experience, as I’ve briefly said before it was sort of like a time machine of going to the future and imagining what a tortilla could be if people start getting into these varieties and into this process. I mean, it was incredible to see the sense of community and commitment and passion to wheat and to techniques and to innovating techniques, and – and yes. Overall, I think it’s a whole, these four participations were amazing and really fruitful.

MRS That’s so interesting the way you describe that and particularly in relation to what you’re doing. It sounds as though that sense of communication between different elements of a food system is – is almost the key to finding a way to preserve cultural heritage, agriculture heritage.

SC I do think so...and, even across – I mean even across industry sectors, and thinking about art and design, and today I went to – we went to visit Fernando Laposse. We’ve been in conversation for some months now, but we haven’t met in person yet. And, it was just amazing how to think about other industries, and especially from my arts background to think about what art can do, and how through other industries we can discuss food. I mean, of course, [laugh] I’m talking to – to you [laugh].

MRS Well, no I mean I think Fernando is one of the artists, designers, however he wants to define himself that we will be showing in the food exhibition and his project Totomoxtle is a really beautiful example of...How to connect different elements of a system in order to – to make the whole thing work in a more just, more healthy, more sustainable way. And, it sounds as though your two projects have a great deal in common.

SC Yes, I mean I like to think about our projects together as sort of how the maize plant, everything is used there’s no waste, and so he’s using the husks, and we’re – you know, commercialising the grains, and it’s just ways of thinking about this full usage of a plant as ancient as it was, and as modern as it is, with our projects, you know?

MRS So, where do you see your work going, ideally? What would you like to be the next stage for TAMOA?

SC I guess, I would like to see just continuity and persistence, and thinking about more communities and thinking about more committed consumers and thinking about more awareness. And, also, I’m very interested in thinking about products like beans and chillies, just to support the idea of the Milpa System as well. Yes, I guess — I guess with those two are good objectives for now.
Absolutely, and I’m interested as well, I mean, you talked about you know your first European Restaurant. How do you refer to the people you work with, customer? No, that’s not quite right is it?

I guess client.

Client, okay.

It’s a very businessy [sic] word but it’s true they are.

What’s the relationship between what you’re doing and kind of foreign partners I suppose, partners in Europe, or the US, or outside of Mexico? Are there risks to engaging people outside of Mexico in what you’re doing?

Sure, no it’s a question that we’ve asked ourselves from the beginning, you know, like creating demand abroad and thinking about environmental footprint, and so we’re thinking about these things all the time. So, what we have done in the US we have rented a small warehouse in Texas which allows for better distribution to clients in the US, also more affordable, especially, because mostly tortilleros and many of these restaurants don’t have a place to store, and also, less shipping, less logistics. So, we are thinking environmental footprint that way, and in Europe as well. So, after this – after this UK trip we’re going to be visiting Rotterdam to explore an opportunity to have a small space to store some grains there and be able to ship and to – and ship less, you know. But yes, so that’s basically how we work abroad.

I’m thinking as well though about the – I suppose the value, and the cultural value in a sense of heritage varieties of corn. Is there a risk that if they become very attractive to people outside of Mexico, then...

What would happen to our national consumption? To be honest we were very, very careful about – we are very careful - but we were extremely careful at the beginning on surplus production because of what we’ve heard with – with what we’ve seen with the Quinoa case, you know and – and farmers not being able to eat it anymore because it’s just – it’s such a, you know, it’s better for them to sell it, for them it’s such a – you know, it’s just better for them.

It’s too profitable not to.

It’s too profitable not to, exactly. And, we were very cautious we were asking for ‘how many hectares’?, ‘what’s your yield’?, ‘how many members in your family can you sign, and you do, can we establish this relationship where we can trust that you’re not actually selling us, you know, the corn that you would be eating and feeding your family’?. And – and then it got to a point where farmers told us, ‘you’re so naïve, we’re not going to sell you a corn that – I mean, we’ve gone through all of this already, we will never sell you our corn’. And, now we’re still cautious and we take very seriously surplus production. But I guess we’re – we’re not being so – in this like paternalistic relationship of me thinking that you would rather have money than your culture – you know, we’re trying to have more transparent relationships with farmers.

I suppose an operation like yours only functions properly through a real relationship of trust.

Exactly, for sure. I mean, we’re basically a project you know tends to cut-out unnecessary middle men, and unnecessary middle men that are paying marginal prices that are not thinking about the
necessities of the community. That are not taking into account quality or – or accompaniment in – in you know in farming and soil nutrition and all these things. But we’re thinking about in a more profound way, I guess. If that makes any sense.

MRS  It absolutely does.

SC  Yes.

MRS  And, I think it’s been absolutely fascinating talking to you, thank you so much for coming and sharing your – your experiences.

SC  No, my pleasure, thank you, and I’m looking forward to your exhibition.

MRS  Well, we shall look forward to welcoming you.

[Laugh]