

Denver Food Rescue: Araceli Chicken and Salad

Araceli, a program participant in the Healthy Choice Food Box Program, shares with us her story while addressing the social determinants of health, including built environment and economic stability. She also makes her mother's recipe for roasted chicken and vegetable salad.



Photo by Araceli

Araceli, a program participant in the Healthy Choice Food Box Program, shares with us her story while addressing social determinants of health, including built environment and economic stability. She also makes her mother's recipe for roasted chicken and vegetable salad. Araceli is a mother of three who immigrated to the United States about six years ago from Guanajuato, Mexico. She recounts how her experience with food, community, and family has changed since her move and how she has navigated living and raising her kids in this new landscape. She is a program participant of [Denver Food Rescue's \(DFR\) Healthy Choice Food Box \(HCFB\)](#). This program, which started in the summer of 2021, has assisted 300 families in Denver to receive free monthly food boxes. The program's initial goal was to assist families facing transportation barriers, although Araceli does not face this particular issue. She shares with us her story while creating a recipe to enjoy, roasted chicken and vegetable salad.

This recipe of roasted chicken and vegetable salad is something that has been passed down from Araceli's mother to her. It has been a staple dish that Araceli makes to ensure her children eat more vegetables. The vegetables for this dish can be interchanged or replaced with whatever vegetables you enjoy. For this recipe, Araceli used some of the different produce provided by the program. In the contents of Box 1 she used the tomatoes, lettuce, and cucumbers for the salad. This quick and easy recipe also ensures that her children can be involved in the process.

"They peel the cucumbers, they cut the lettuce, and I prepare the hot stuff, like the chicken. It is something they like, and it helps them eat more vegetables." Each of the kids play an important role in supporting Araceli in the kitchen. She enjoys having them help and watch her prepare these meals together. This time in the kitchen is also an opportunity for them to spend time together like she was accustomed to as a young girl.

Araceli has fond memories of her mom and siblings around the kitchen. Her mom created these warm memories through the food she made and shared. "When I was a little girl, I used to cook with my mom. I have memories during the rain when my mom would make some bread, called panochas, which is made of wheat. In the farm that we lived in, we never had electricity when it was raining. My mom would prepare those breads, and we were little kids, and we'd be around the kitchen table with only candlelight with my mom, cooking and telling stories." These sweet moments, embedded in Araceli's memory, inspire how she raises her children. She wants to continue passing on the feelings she had with her mom by building similar memories with her kids.

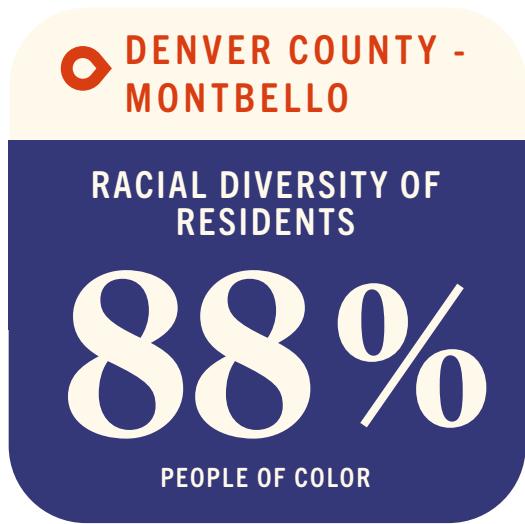
In Araceli's household, she takes care of the children while her husband goes to work. Both agree that this style of parenting is the most supportive and caring environment for their kids while they're young. Her husband and she were raised similarly and make efforts to maintain this family dynamic. They proudly have been able to do this and believe that other families would also raise their children this way, but financial constraints make it challenging. "It's not that we as moms want to leave them; it's because of the circumstances. We have to pay for the house, the food,

so it's the need to have to go to work."

Araceli and her husband have worked hard to support their children by planning and organizing. She explains that they have been able to budget themselves and through this technique maintain their lifestyle. Although the increasing challenge is that the cost of living, including food and gas, continues to increase, while their income has stayed the same. "We spend the same amount of money yet we bring less food because everything is so expensive. Sometimes it affects us because we want to buy something, and it's more expensive, and I don't have the option to buy it ... and another thing that affects us is the gas cost. It is too expensive and high."

Over the past year, the United States has experienced an increase in all consumer goods. The Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U), [reported an increase in gasoline prices by 33.7 percent from May 2021 to May 2022](#). This has translated to the gas pump. Gas is currently on average [\\$4.017 per gallon, while last year at the same time in May, it was \\$1.719 per gallon](#). The cost of food has also been affected as a result of [supply-chain issues from the pandemic, labor shortages, and increased consumer demands](#). This has [increased food prices from May 2021 to May 2022 by 9.8 percent](#).

Araceli and her husband, along with many others, are affected by these conditions. Although, they have been able to support themselves by purchasing less, not using their vehicles as much, and condensing multiple errands into one-day excursions. "We try to organize ourselves ... He goes to one store, and I go to the other and we get all the things we need in one day." The HCFS program has also been able to decrease some of the financial cost that they have seen at the grocery store. "When I receive the full box, and I make my list for the groceries for the week ... I spend a little less than I would have." With these improvisations they have been able to support Araceli in raising and taking care of their kids at home.



The place they call home is in Montbello, a northeast neighborhood in Denver. This neighborhood is one of the largest growing communities in Denver with over [9,000 housing units](#). This neighborhood is also diverse, with about 88 percent of residents identifying as people of color (CO Equity Compass).

Although Montbello is larger and more diverse than other parts of Denver, it is quite different from what Araceli grew up in. The town she grew up in, in Guanajuato, was small, tightly knit, walkable, full of familiar faces, and agriculturally centered.

"I was born in Mexico in the state of Guanajuato. The area that we lived in, the town, we harvested a lot of corn, wheat, and vegetables. On the side of the streets you would just see people walking around and selling their vegetables." This environment

growing up provided Araceli more access to fresh food. She also explained that when she came to the United States the quality of food changed. "I think the change is in the nutrients in the vegetables here and now. Even the freshness in the meat, like the chicken, is different. It has been frozen or cooled for a couple of days, while over there everything was fresh. We killed the chicken the same day."

Modern agricultural practices in the United States have impacted the nutrient contents in fruits and vegetables throughout the country. These techniques have [depleted soil health, favored high yield products over nutrient density, and introduced heavy amounts of pesticides and fertilizers](#). Meanwhile access to organic or farm fresh produce cost more than regular produce and even more than processed food. Research has supported that, on average, [more nutrient packed foods are twice as expensive as lower-nutrient processed food](#).

Araceli seeks to provide her children with nutrient-packed food. She learned through her mom that food impacts

the body and its development. "My mom taught me that the body needs all the nutrients. That is why nature gave us all the variety. So we need to eat vegetables, fruits, seeds ... I believe it is really important to eat a variety, the most healthy you can, the most natural you can." This program has been able to support that goal, by partnering with [East Denver Food Hub](#). They provide farm fresh food that focuses on local and equitable food system practices. Araceli has also made considerable efforts to provide nutrient dense food in her children's diet by cooking and doing the best to follow a similar lifestyle to what she was raised in.

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In her previous neighborhood of Guanajuato, Araceli was able to easily walk around. She grew up walking through the community, knowing those around her as family or close friends. In Montbello, driving is the central way to get around. Although this transportation mode allows for convenience, it is time consuming without proper infrastructure. "Generally the stores that we go to are about 20 minutes away." These farther distances along with the higher price of gas make it a challenge to access readily available goods. About 3.17 percent of the population in this neighborhood have access to healthy food in a 1-mile radius compared to 9.21 percent for all of Denver County (CO Equity Compass).

The other side to that coin is that the large driving culture and infrastructure in Montbello make it difficult for people to feel safe in the streets. Araceli prefers to have her kids play in the backyard or wait for her husband to go out. Her fear is a combination of factors, but cars are a huge one. "There are speeding cars, and they don't respect people walking in the streets." Montbello has about 94.3 percent of households having access to a car (CO Equity Compass). This increases access to transportation needs, but presents some unique problems when other infrastructure isn't in place. In 2017, CU Denver graduate students conducted a walkability assessment and found that Montbello faces walkability issues because of [speeding vehicles, lack of safe crossings, and poorly maintained sidewalks](#). To resolve these issues infrastructure development is needed to provide a safe pedestrian environment, especially for young children.

Groups like [Montbello Walks](#) and other community partners have been working to improve this infrastructure. Many projects are expected or are in process to improve some of the issues. In the meantime, families like Araceli have had to be creative to deal with these challenges. Araceli has been able to let her children explore and be outside by taking them to areas nearby like designated parks, pools, libraries, and spending time in their backyard. She also has her husband's family nearby, providing her and her family an additional place to bond, spend time together, and support one another.

Family is an important value to Araceli. She grew up with her husband's family near her town in Guanajuato. Her husband's family moved to Montbello and provided a lot of comfort and familiarity to Araceli. She is grateful that these relationships have been with her since she was a child. "Having a relationship with people that you've known since you were young, that is beautiful." Their family also helps each other when either needs additional support, like watching the kids. Araceli's mom was her biggest supporter, teacher, and confidant. She even told us that the first person she would reach out to with anything would be her mom. "Until now, the first person I think to call is my mom." Her mom showed her through her actions that family would always be there for her. Araceli wants to make sure her kids are aware of this as well.

Her hopes are that she and her husband can continue to raise their kids in a loving environment that supports their growth. "I think my large objective is for them [my children] to be independent but that they never forget how important the family is. The day they need something that they remember that they have their family for help.

I tell my husband that I will enjoy it when my kids talk to me in confidence and trust me because I believe that family can help you the best, and part of it is we share the same feelings and blood. That is what I want to teach my children to be independent but to never forget that we are here to support them."

Even in independence we sometimes need help from others. In these moments Araceli has been able to lean on her family and especially her mom to find comfort and strength when she needs it. We hope to continue to support her so that she may continue supporting her family.

We, at Denver Food Rescue, are thankful to be of help in any way, although we know there is more to be done. Thank you Araceli for sharing your time and story with us.

ROSTED CHICKEN AND VEGETABLE SALAD RECIPE

Ingredients:

For chicken:

1 chicken breast (cut into cubes)
1 teaspoon of salt
1 teaspoon of pepper
1 teaspoon of paprika
½ of a lemon

For salad:

1 head of lettuce, washed (cut into bite-size pieces)
2 tomatoes (cubed)
1 cucumber (cubed)
1 bell pepper (cut into strips)
Optional: 1 tablespoon of ranch dressing

For rice:

1 cup of white long grain rice
2 cups of water
½ teaspoon of salt or chicken bouillon
Optional: ½ cup frozen or fresh vegetables like corn, cut green beans, carrots, or Mexican squash

Instructions:

1. Prepare items by chopping vegetables into cubes and strips and place aside.
2. Cut chicken into cubes and marinate for one hour with salt, pepper, paprika, and lemon to taste.
3. Heat about one teaspoon of olive oil in a medium sized skillet over medium heat, place chicken breast cubes in skillet and cook until edges are opaque, about 8–10 minutes.
4. Flip chicken, cover, and cook on a lower temperature for another 8–10 minutes.
5. Let chicken rest for 5 minutes before serving.
6. Wash rice until rinsed clear and place in a small pot with 2 cups of water and salt and bring to a boil uncovered. Optional: Add in ½ cup of fresh or frozen vegetables.
7. Once the rice is boiling, cover the pot, reduce the heat, and simmer for 15 minutes.
8. Remove from the heat and let it sit, covered for 10 more minutes. Fluff with a fork.
9. Assemble chopped vegetables for salad and mix with ranch dressing if wanted.
10. Serve chicken with rice and salad.



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