

# San Vaquero: Food, Dignity and Everyday Resistance

Experienced with the community group, *Guaches y Guarichas*, of UPZ80 Corabastos, Bogotá, *San Vaquero* is the revered practice of pooling small monetary contributions to buy food for everyone to share. While fulfilling physical the need for nourishment, it also has a deeper significance - also nourishing the soul and community through creating a social space to bond, decompress and equalise individuals in the act of eating and sharing food. This practice has emerged from a setting of extreme scarcity, conflict and food insecurity in the locality, where despite abundance in the neighbouring Corabastos market, food access is neither equal nor guaranteed for UPZ80 residents. In this food desert, *San Vaquero* is respected as a sacred ritual, representing an act of care, resistance and resourcefulness within a capitalist system. While relieving hunger, it also serves as a vital emotional release and collective act of care in a volatile and precarious environment. This deeply ethical practice redefines conventional understanding of both care and value, representing the different depths of significance assigned to everyday acts in a context of struggle.

## Beyond Sustenance: Food as Resistance and Reparative Care

The term *Vaquero*, meaning cowboy, is used across Latin America to describe shared drinks or cultural contributions, but the addition of *San* - meaning saint or sacred - reflects a deeper meaning within this community. *San Vaquero* emerges as a radical, collective response to a system that has failed to provide for its people. Free from judgement or expectation, individuals contribute what money they can to pool resources for a shared snack or meal. This act defies capitalist and individualistic logics, fostering solidarity to confront structural inequities and environmental injustices.

Born from a context of insecurity and food scarcity, *San Vaquero* transcends mere calories or sustenance - it connects material, emotional and symbolic needs. As a unifying force, it strengthens the social fabric, facilitating connection through dialogue, and equalising diverse identities through the most basic of human needs: food. It ensures inclusion and dignity regardless of individual circumstance - especially for those who haven't eaten in days - enabling full participation in learning and community life. The integrality of *San Vaquero* to this community, both through the nourishment and emotional regulation provided, has earned it sacred status. This sharing of food subtly echoes Catholic traditions like the breaking of bread in Holy Communion, where food becomes a symbol of spiritual care and unity. This is especially poignant given the proximity to Corabastos, a major food market that starkly contrasts with the hunger experienced locally. Here, food becomes a symbol of care and hope - an enduring source of peace and stability resisting against an insecure and exclusionary system.



Figure 1. “It’s like a representation of sharing and collectivising food, which is ultimately what ends up uniting people, right?” - Patchi, *Guaches y Guarichas*. (His representation of *San Vaquero*).

*San Vaquero* reminds me of the deep-rooted cultural and social bond with food across the world. From the importance of a Sunday lunch shared by family in the UK to the communal spirit of a soup kitchen, food is far more than sustenance. Even in the simple British act of offering a cup of tea, as I shared with the people of UPZ80, food becomes a medium for comfort, connection and healing. However, unlike these familiar, safe settings, *San Vaquero* emerges as something more powerful, born from collective struggle. It is a survival strategy, both physical and emotional, in the face of adversity. Listening to the community’s intensity of feeling as they describe *San Vaquero*, I understand how in this context, food is no longer simply a function of life. It serves a reparative and therapeutic function, a ritual offering continuity, trust and dignity. Elton’s (2019) more-than-human perspective reinforces this, emphasising the agency of food in emotional regulation and its’ role as a reparative force within the assemblage of human and nonhuman health. My experience of *San Vaquero*, sharing emotion and genuine connection with members of the community, showed me that food is only one part of a much deeper, holistic experience of care.

## Redefining Value and Metrics

By imbuing the seemingly mundane act of eating with emotional and symbolic meaning, *San Vaquero* challenges conventional understandings of value. In mainstream planning and development frameworks, care and food are often reduced to quantifiable metrics - measured in calories or delivered as services - stripping them of relational and cultural significance. Through *San Vaquero*, sharing food becomes a transformational experience,

shifting from a transaction to a ritual of care, solidarity and resistance. This reframing raises ethical critique in research priorities and measures of progress: How is value assigned? To what? By who?

*San Vaquero* reveals the significance and meaning overlooked by dominant understandings of food as a commodity or mere sustenance. It shows that value can be relational, emotional and deeply embedded in context and lived experience. This aligns with feminist ethics of care which emphasise relational, context-specific, and embodied forms of care often marginalised in dominant Western discourses. As Raghuram (2016) argues, care must be understood not through universal or hierarchal frameworks, but as a situated, relational ethic - continuously produced through local contingencies and grounded in everyday practice. This perspective reinforces *San Vaquero's* challenge to dominant value systems by showing how everyday acts like sharing food carry deep ethical significance, reorienting value around lived experience and collective care.

This resilient practice has emerged in resistance to structural inequalities, demonstrating the adaptability and ingenuity of local knowledge and solidarity. It echoes critiques from post-development theorists such as Arturo Escobar, who argue that dominant knowledge systems overshadow local ways of living and lay knowledge (Rekhviashvili, 2021). Their work calls for a shift towards pluriversality - rooted in the aspirations and ontologies of communities resisting the universalising forces of development.

By challenging normative categories and metrics in planning, *San Vaquero* invites us to develop indicators that are uniquely relevant and endemic to the territory, inseparable from lived experience. Exemplifying Willems-Braun's (1997) notion of 'buried epistemologies', *San Vaquero* demonstrates alternative ways of knowing and valuing the world that emerge from lived experience. These systems may be incommensurable with mainstream development metrics, but are no less legitimate. This calls for a shift in how we measure success and progress in development planning, re-centring our objectives and indicators around local values and lay knowledge systems.

### **Whose knowledge counts?**

As a resilient, locally-adapted strategy of care, *San Vaquero* exemplifies the innovative models and knowledge that communities develop to care for themselves in times of struggle. The ingenuity and adaptability embodied in *San Vaquero* raise important ethical questions about *what* should be studied in research. Sustained by reciprocity, long-term commitment and solidarity, *San Vaquero* represents a deeply ethical and enduring system of support built from the bottom-up, challenging the imposition of external dominant narratives in development planning. It demonstrates that informal networks can be both effective and resilient, offering valuable lessons for other models of care and development. These principles of solidarity and reciprocity, performed through daily *San Vaqueros*, emphasise trust-building through everyday acts of care and long-term relationships. While avoiding romanticisation of practices born from necessity, planning agendas and

sustainable development practices should be inspired by and supportive of these informal systems, reflecting these values as central to ethical and effective development.

*San Vaquero* prompts deeper reflection not only on *what*, but also on *whose* knowledge should be included in ethical research. It demands a more reflexive approach to one's positionality as a researcher or 'expert', confronting the assumptions embedded in dominant frameworks that often overlook emotional, symbolic and relational dimensions of everyday life. Personally, *San Vaquero* reminded me to approach the field not as an expert, but as a listener and learner - echoing Freire's (1970) call for dialogical engagement. Communities like those in UPZ80 are not passive recipients of development interventions; they are active agents, holders of wisdom and producers of knowledge. Having already developed informal, resilient systems of support and survival, they deserve recognition, autonomy and respect in the planning process.

*San Vaquero* challenges us to expand our understanding of valid knowledge, advocating for decolonial and participatory methodologies that centre local voices. Kamlongera et al.'s (2024) work on decoloniality and participant-centred methodologies echoes this imperative, calling for dialogic approaches that resist singular, generalised narratives. Rather than treated as passive beneficiaries, participants must be recognised as authoritative sources of their own lived experience and co-creators of knowledge. This shift is essential for ethical research that genuinely reflects the complexity and insight already embedded in local systems, strategies and experiences.

### **Rituals of Care: Practicing Ethical Engagement**

More than simply challenging whose knowledge or which notions should be embedded within development planning, *San Vaquero* draws attention to the *process* of ethical engagement itself - the *how* rather than just the *what*. Over time, it became clear to me that *San Vaquero* was not just a practice, but a ritual - a meaningful, repeated act and symbolic component of the territorial culture of *Guaches y Guarichas*. More than a cultural expression, this ritual holds deep significance, cultivating a shared ethic of connection and care within the territory.

These everyday rituals and ways of being are often overlooked in formal research and planning processes, yet they are essential to understanding the lived realities of communities. Reflexively engaging with these rituals should be an essential component of doing research, as such engagement can disrupt entrenched power asymmetries between researchers and participants (Kamlongera et al., 2024). This demands critical reflection from researchers and planners: How can we recognise, respect and meaningfully engage with these rituals without co-opting or disrupting them? *San Vaquero* teaches that ethical engagement is not solely about outcomes or solutions. It is about the process: building relationships, sharing experiences and creating space for empathy and understanding. The ethics of dignity and care, embodied in the ritual of ensuring everyone shares something to eat, is a sentiment I will strive to carry forward in my future encounters.



Figure 2. Sharing *San Vaquero* with *Guaches y Guarichas*.

## Reclaiming the Everyday

Participating in *San Vaquero* with *Guaches y Guarichas* in the UPZ80 territory was a humbling experience, teaching me to recognise value in what is often assumed as unimportant or informal. It reminds me to re-examine what we take for granted, to value presence and connection over progress, and to see dignity and reciprocity not as abstract principles, but as something enacted through everyday acts of care. Going forward, planners and researchers must approach their work with this same humility and respect - promoting local knowledge, prioritising lived experiences and supporting informal strategies. *San Vaquero* illustrates that the most resilient and meaningful practices are found in the everyday rituals and acts of resistance that communities develop to care for one another.

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