

REFLECTIONS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GASTRONOMIC HERITAGE OF THE RARÁMURI COMMUNITY

Samantha Aranda Quiroga¹

Abstract:

The Rarámuri, or Tarahumara, are an ethnic group from the Sierra Madre Occidental in Chihuahua, Mexico, known for their traditions and clothing; their diet was based on corn, pinole, local vegetables (potatoes, zucchini, chiltepín, pinto beans), and game. However, their dietary habits underwent drastic changes due to social, economic, cultural, and climatic factors, forcing them to migrate to the cities of Chihuahua and Ciudad Juárez. Given this situation, this research aims to analyze the causes of the loss of their culinary culture and the issues affecting their quality of life. The objective is to explore tourism proposals linked to the Rarámuri culinary heritage that can generate sustainable alternatives to improve the socioeconomic conditions of their communities.

Keywords: Raramuri, Tarahumara, Chihuahua, tesguino, korima, gastronomic heritage

REFLEXIONES, RETOS Y OPORTUNIDADES EN TORNO A LA IMPORTANCIA DEL PATRIMONIO GASTRONÓMICO DE LA COMUNIDAD RARÁMURI

Resumen:

Los Rarámuri, o Tarahumaras, son un grupo étnico de la Sierra Madre Occidental de Chihuahua (México), conocido por sus tradiciones y su vestimenta; su dieta se basaba en el maíz, el pinol, las hortalizas locales (patatas, calabacín, chiltepín, alubias pintas) y la caza. Sin embargo, sus hábitos alimenticios sufrieron cambios drásticos debido a factores sociales, económicos, culturales y climáticos, lo que les obligó a emigrar a las ciudades

¹ Centro de Estudios Universitarios Vizcaya de las Américas, Universidad Vizcaya de las Américas, campus Ciudad Juárez.

de Chihuahua y Ciudad Juárez. Ante esta situación, la presente investigación tiene como objetivo analizar las causas de la pérdida de su cultura culinaria y los problemas que afectan a su calidad de vida. El objetivo es explorar propuestas turísticas vinculadas al patrimonio culinario de los rarámuri que puedan generar alternativas sostenibles para mejorar las condiciones socioeconómicas de sus comunidades.

Palabras clave: Raramuri, Tarahumara, Chihuahua, tesguino, korima, patrimonio gastronómico

1. INTRODUCTION

The Rarámuri, also known as the Tarahumara, are an ethnic group that lives in the northern part of the Sierra Madre Occidental, known as the Sierra Tarahumara. Various studies suggest that the Rarámuri are a very important cultural group in the state of Chihuahua, well known for their great physical endurance and their unique traditions and colorful clothing (Lieberman, et al. 2020).

Previously, the Rarámuri people based their diet on foods made from corn, pinole, certain vegetables (potatoes, zucchini, chiltepín, pinto beans), and game (Lieberman, et al. 2020). Thus, as time has passed, the diet of this community has changed drastically due to social, cultural, economic, and climatic factors such as habitat pollution, drought, limited availability of farmland, deforestation, and other problems that have forced them to adapt to different dietary habits (Lieberman, 2020). Consequently, the Rarámuri have been forced to migrate to various cities in the state of Chihuahua, including the state capital Chihuahua, and Juarez City (Merrill, 1997).

This research not only provides an overview of the gastronomic culture of the indigenous communities in the highlands of Chihuahua but also seeks to analyze the issues affecting the expectations and quality of life of the Rarámuri people, which have forced families in this community to migrate to urban areas, leaving behind their lands, customs, and culture (Aguilera, 2023). For these reasons, the objective of this research is to understand and reflect on tourism proposals related to the Rarámuri's gastronomic heritage, with the aim of improving this community's quality of life, based on an analysis of the causes of changes in their diet and gastronomic culture, as well as the external factors that exacerbate this problem.

2. RARAMURI COMMUNITY

The term “Raramuri community” refers to the populations living in the southwestern region of the mountainous area of the state of Chihuahua, known as the Sierra Tarahumara (Figure 1). The word Raramuri comes from the roots rara (foot) y muri (run). This ethnic group comprises approximately 80,000 people, constituting 3% of the population of the state of Chihuahua and about 1.1% of the country's ethnic population (Lieberman, 2020).

Figure 1. The southwestern region of the Sierra Tarahumara in the state of Chihuahua



Source: Indigenous Mexico, 2024

This ethnic group borders and shares mountainous territory with other communities such as the Tepehuanes, Pimas, Guarijíos, and mestizos. The Rarámuri’s territory is located primarily in various ranches and municipalities such as Guadalupe y Calvo, Morelos, Balleza, Guachochi, Batopilas, Urique, Guazaparez, Moris, Uruachi, Chínipas, Maguarichi, Bocoyna, Nonoava, Carichí, Ocampo, Guerrero, and Temósachi (Nations, 2007). These territories consist of various mountain ranges reaching elevations of up to 3,000 m with steep ravines, creating two distinct ecological zones. The upper part of the mountain range, surrounded by coniferous forests, is characterized by thin soils. This type of soil rapidly loses organic matter, reducing its fertility. In contrast, the areas on the slopes are fertile, with a less extreme climate, facilitating the planting and harvesting of food crops (Díaz, Selene, & Esquivel-García, 2026).

In the Tarahumara region, it is common to find holm oaks, poplars, ash trees, oaks, táscate, chamomile, nopal, ball cactus, and yucca. Wildlife in the region includes the wildcat, coyote, wolf, fox, skunk, squirrel, mouse, mole, eagle, vulture, quail, puma, ocelot, gray bear, white-tailed deer, and wild turkey (Díaz, Selene, & Esquivel-García, 2026).

2.1 Cultural Customs of the Rarámuri Community

The Rarámuri speak a language known as Tarahumara, a language that has evolved over hundreds of years and is part of the yuto-azteca language family. The Tarahumara language belongs to the cahíta-ópata-tarahumara. A Rarámuri family consists of a father, a mother, and their children. Socially, they are led by a siríame, that is, a leader—whose role is to hold Sunday meetings where sermons (nawésari), are given, organize traditional festivals, and represent the community before the authorities. For this reason, it is common

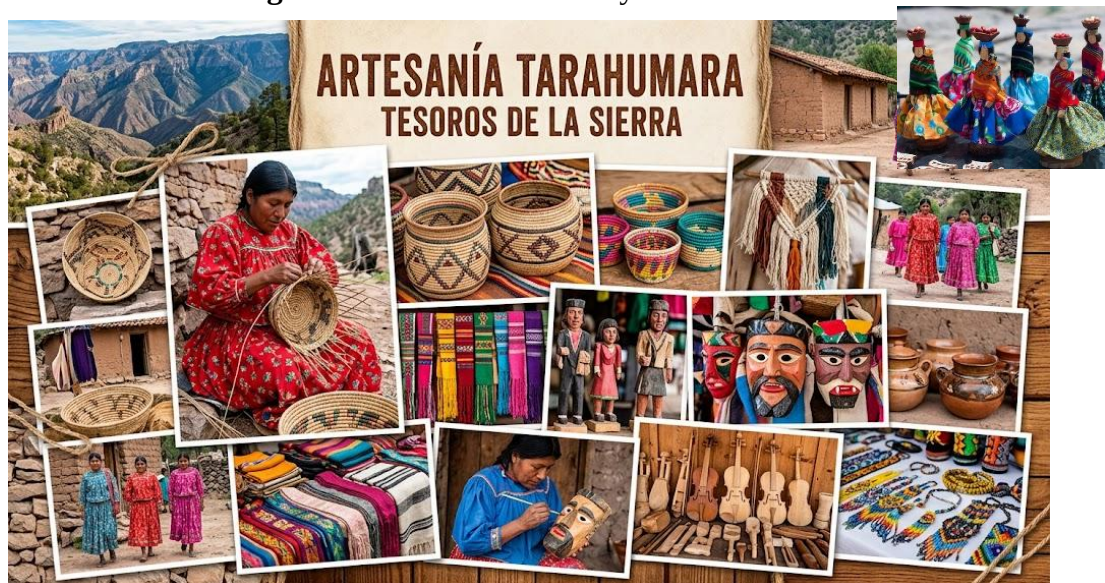
to find a church, a school, a store, and a clinic (Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas, 2017).

The houses in this community are made of wood or pine, adobe, quarry stone, or other stone, depending on the materials available in the region. Most homes consist of a single room, where it is common to find sheet-metal stoves or heaters and metates—wooden platforms used as beds—along with blankets. Although the primary function of the home is to provide shelter from rain and cold, the community sleeps and cooks outdoors (Aguilera, 2023). It is customary for families to hold a *tesgüinada* after construction, which serves as a vital space for interaction among family members. Likewise, *tesgüinada* are held during different stages of the agricultural cycles, for ceremonies related to agriculture, as well as during construction work (Aguilera, 2023).

3. ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF THE RARÁMURI

The Rarámuri economy is based on three main activities: agriculture, livestock raising, and handicrafts. Their agriculture centers on the cultivation of corn, which is planted on the slopes of the mountains. Livestock raising focuses on goats, although cattle, horses, and chickens are also raised to a lesser extent. Finally, the third source of income comes from handicrafts, which are produced by community members themselves. It is common for women to make clay pots, bowls, plates, glasses, cups, and jugs. They also use palm fronds and palm leaves to weave baskets of various sizes. Men make violins, balls, bows, and drums, as well as wooden trays and spoons; they carve wooden figures and weave woolen blankets and sashes featuring geometric patterns, as shown in Figure 2 (Moreno-Calles, et al. (2016).

Figure 2. Handicrafts made by the Rarámuri.



Source: <https://www.gob.mx/inpi/articulos/etnografia-del-pueblo-tarahumara-raramuri>.

4. THE RARAMURI'S DIET

Traditional cuisine is understood as the gastronomic representation of a community, region, or country. It refers to the most commonly consumed foods, as well as the ingredients used in the preparation of various dishes (Martínez-Armendáriz et al., 2025). For the Raramuri, food is considered a blessing from God because it is of natural origin, planted and harvested by the community itself. Furthermore, mealtime is sacred as a moment of blessing and fellowship. These traditions have endured for a long time, although some aspects have gradually changed. In 1603, when the missionaries arrived, the Raramuri lived in scattered settlements; there were no villages or gathering places, which made it easier for them to cultivate corn, beans, and squash, and to engage in foraging and fishing. In addition, they hunted pheasants, guacos (turkeys), herons, ducks, quail, swallows, and rabbits; various species of squirrels and mice; skunks, raccoons, white-tailed deer, wild boars, lizards, deer, birds, and frogs (Aguilera, 2023).

Figure 3. Typical meals of the Rarámuri community.



Source: Sabores de México y el Mundo, 2026

As time went on, the Tarahumara stopped eating corn that had been roasted and ground on the metate; their diet consisted of native corn varieties—azul, cristalino, and apachito—which they consumed mainly in the form of pinole, atoles, tamales, and ceremonial beverages such as tesguino, but after the arrival of the Spaniards in the Sierra Tarahumara, they adopted the wheat tortilla, although the Rarámuri continued to use the handmade nixtamalized corn tortilla as the central accompaniment to their traditional dishes, such as tónari and yoriki (a nopal stew) (Cárdenas-Carrión, 2014). In this way, the tortilla not only survived the colonial encounter but also established itself as a pillar of

resistance and biocultural identity in the face of the culinary changes of the era (Aguilera, 2023).

For its part, *tónari* is a ritual broth traditionally made with beef, goat, or venison sacrificed as an offering; this dish contains no salt or other seasonings while it is cooking in clay pots. It is seasoned solely with wild herbs from the mountains. Cooking it without salt reflects a spiritual principle they hold: food must be presented to the deities in its purest and most natural state (Piedepagina, 2022). Eating *tónari* during Holy Week celebrations or community healing ceremonies is an act of healing and gratitude that nourishes both the body and the group’s cosmological fabric (Armendáriz et al., 2025). Today, the cuisine of the Sierra Tarahumara revolves around corn, beans, and squash; corn is used to prepare various dishes, including their traditional drink called *tesgüino*.

4.1 The Tesgüino and the Tónari: The Table as an Altar of Community

In Rarámuri thought, eating in isolation lacks deep meaning. Their culinary heritage finds its highest expression in collective and ritual acts, where food serves as the social glue that unites the living, the ancestors, and the gods (Piedepagina, 2022). The two most sacred culinary traditions are *tesgüino* and *tónari*, which are described below.

Tesgüino (*sugíki*) is a thick fermented beverage made from tender corn shoots. Its preparation is a ceremonial process that requires days of vigilance and respect. Beyond its intoxicating properties, *tesgüino* serves as a catalyst for social harmony in the highlands through the *tesgüinadas* (Cárdenas-Carrión, 2014). At these communal gatherings, the bonds of reciprocity known as *korima* are rekindled: neighbors help one another build a house, clear a cornfield, or tend to livestock, and the reward is the shared communion through the sacred drink. *Tesgüino* is shared from a communal gourd that is passed around among everyone, dissolving hierarchies and strengthening the collective spirit (Armendáriz et al., 2025).

Tesgüino comes from the Nahuatl words *tescuini*, *batari*, *suguí*, or *soguiki*, which mean “heartbeat,” and is one of the traditional fermented corn beverages of the Raramuri people, who produce it in large quantities to drink on the most important occasions in their social life. This beverage is an integral part of this indigenous group’s existence and indispensable to its survival. It is worth noting the role that the consumption of *tesgüino* plays as a symbol of solidarity and social cohesion, precisely because it is consumed on occasions that bring the community together—whether for religious ceremonies, rituals, festivals, or work (Cárdenas-Carrión, 2014).

Furthermore, *tesgüino* has a spiritual significance because, as mentioned earlier, it is an integral part of religious festivals, such as Holy Week celebrations, but it is also considered a gift bestowed by God, Onorúame, “He Who Is Father”. Therefore, it is impossible to understand the Tarahumara culinary heritage in isolation from its mystical and communal traditions. An example of this is *tesgüino* (*sugíki*), a traditional fermented beverage made from sprouted and fermented corn, characterized by its thick consistency and low alcohol content. *Tesgüino* is a social beverage and the sacred catalyst of Rarámuri

culture. Tasting tesgüino as a community is an act of social reciprocity and communion in which individual hierarchies are set aside in favor of collective well-being. At festivals, the drink is served in ladles made from gourd shells that are passed from hand to hand during community celebrations. At their gatherings, they make an offering to God by pouring tesgüino at the cardinal points, thereby giving thanks for the food to please Father Sun and Mother Moon and thus ensure they bring rain. The Rarámuri believe in never asking God for anything but always giving thanks for whatever He gives them, whether much or little (Martínez-Armendáriz et al., 2025). Therefore, through the preparation and shared consumption of tesgüino and the hearty beef or goat broths cooked during ritual festivals (tonari), the principle of korima is put into practice, that is, the cornerstone of Rarámuri ethics dictates the obligation to share what one has with those in need, based on the premise that the earth's bounty belongs not to the individual, but to the community and the deities. Thus, the culinary heritage becomes an instrument of social justice, ensuring that no one goes hungry in the mountains if a neighbor has a handful of corn or a pot of beans to offer.

5. PREPARATION OF TEGÜINO

Tesgüino is prepared by soaking corn kernels for several days in sacks away from light until they germinate, so that the starches are converted into sugars. The kernels are then ground on metates to produce a paste, which is mixed with water and boiled in pots for several hours. When the liquid turns yellow, roots, herbs, or tree bark are added as additives to promote the growth of microorganisms. It is filtered and poured into pots used exclusively for fermenting the beverage for 24 hours (Cárdenas-Carrión, 2014). After this time, the tesgüino must be consumed immediately to prevent it from spoiling. This drink can also be made from corn stalks; the juice is extracted by crushing them, then filtered and boiled with water. Catalysts are added, and the mixture is left to ferment for two or three days (Fournier-García and Mondragón-Barrios, 2012).

Figure 4. Making of Tesguino



Source: Fournier-García and Mondragón-Barrios, 2012

Another important food is meat, especially game meat, which has long been a staple of their traditional dishes, served with soup, vegetables, and cornmeal. As a result, Tarahumara cuisine offers a wide variety of traditional dishes that highlight the region’s unique flavors and culinary techniques; the most traditional of these are listed below (Cárdenas-Carrión, 2014).

Tónare is a hearty meat stew that originated in pre-Hispanic times and is still enjoyed today. This dish is typically served with no seasoning other than salt, and the meat is simmered for hours in its own juices. On the other hand, sun-dried beef is a popular dish cooked with onions, tomatoes, and chilies. This dish is usually served in small portions alongside plenty of tortillas and beans. Bean soup is made with local herbs and spices and is often served with tortillas and quelites. Finally, pinole is a traditional beverage (Cárdenas-Carrión, 2014). It is made by grinding roasted corn flour and mixing it with water, sweeteners, and sometimes spices. Pinole is a nutritious drink that provides energy and is often enjoyed by the Tarahumara during long-distance races and competitions.

6. CHALLENGES POSED BY CHANGES TO GASTRONOMIC HERITAGE

The geographical isolation of the canyons long served as a protective wall for the Rarámuri culture. However, their heritage now faces one of the most complex crossroads in its history due to extrinsic factors such as the devastating pressures of climate change, which disrupts the rainfall essential for the milpa. The impacts of climate change on the Rarámuri community stem from a lack of nutrients in their poorly balanced diets and a shortage of corn, as well as deforestation and the dispossession of their lands, among other factors.

Forced displacement caused by violence in the region and the aggressive expansion of paved roads and trade routes have facilitated the arrival of the ultra-processed food industry, which offers low nutritional value. Today, the social, cultural, and dietary landscape has changed; it is common to see community stores or franchises in the highlands that are often replacing bean and corn crops with shelves of bottled soft drinks, refined-flour snacks, and instant soups. In this regard, low-cost, high-calorie industrialized products are presented as the most accessible alternative to gathering the ingredients to make traditional atole or pinole when the family’s own harvest has been lost. Unfortunately, this shift replaces complex carbohydrates—which are slowly absorbed and high in fiber, and whose consumption is linked to both physical and ecological health—with an industrialized environment that promotes simple sugars and saturated fats.

When a young Rarámuri migrates to urban or tourist centers in Chihuahua and adopts a diet based on refined flours and sugary drinks, not only is their metabolism altered (leading to a concerning diabetes epidemic among the indigenous population), but the thread of their culinary heritage is also severed. The disuse of plant names in the Rarámuri language, the abandonment of native seeds in favor of commercial grains, and the gradual loss of traditional pottery represent a silent erosion of an invaluable biocultural heritage.

7. OPPORTUNITIES FOR CULINARY TOURISM IN THE RARAMURI CUISINE

Preserving Raramuri cuisine means defending this people's right to own the land, conserve their native seeds, and make autonomous decisions about their means of subsistence. Culinary heritage is a testament to cultural resilience; despite the introduction of ultra-processed foods and the severe climate challenges threatening their crops, their cuisine has endured thanks to this people's unbreakable attachment to their roots (Moreno-Calles, et al. 2016).

Appreciating and protecting Rarámuri cuisine means defending their territory from deforestation, guaranteeing access to water for their communities, respecting their native seeds in the face of genetically modified crops, and valuing the tradition of the dishes enjoyed in the Sierra Tarahumara. Preserving Rarámuri dietary habits requires comprehensive public policies that go beyond the welfare-based approach of providing processed foods. It is essential to promote food sovereignty through technical and financial support for sustainable agriculture in the mountains, water conservation in the face of climate crises, and the promotion of pinole, quelites, and beans in schools.

The Sierra Tarahumara has become an undeniable attraction. Visitors are drawn by the colossal landscapes of the Copper Canyon and also by the mystery of its ancestral foods, such as pinole, chacales, el tonari, and wild quelites. Therefore, the primary challenge for culinary tourism in the Sierra Tarahumara lies in the risk of the "commodification of the sacred" — that is, many of its most complex and significant culinary preparations do not belong in the realm of commercial dining. However, when the tourism market attempts to force the availability of these foods to meet the demand of a travel itinerary, there is a danger of stripping the food of its essence, transforming it into a mere exotic spectacle. Presenting tesguino in a hotel bar or serving a mock ceremonial meal at a buffet distorts the profound meaning that sustains the community (Moreno-Calles et al. 2016). Furthermore, most tour operators in the highlands, hoteliers, and travel agencies market "mystical Rarámuri experiences", while local producers and traditional cooks are relegated to mere extras in a staged production, receiving only a tiny fraction of the profits. Gastronomic tourism is ethically viable only if the indigenous community has absolute control over the narrative, the execution, and the economic benefits of its own cuisine.

So, how does a tourism initiative fit into a food system where the act of eating is closely linked to ritual, scarcity, and communal reciprocity? This question builds on what has already been mentioned: the tensions, the risks of folklorization, and the genuine opportunities for development that arise from transforming the Rarámuri culinary heritage into an object of tourist consumption.

Another critical factor that must be analyzed is the fragility of the highlands' food ecosystem. Tarahumara agriculture is subsistence-based and seasonal; it depends on the mountain's rainfall cycles, which have been severely impacted in recent years by climate change and prolonged droughts. Native corn, beans, squash, and the seasonal gathering of

quelites and mushrooms provide just enough sustenance for families throughout the year. Therefore, introducing massive external demand for these endemic ingredients to feed gastronomic tourism could place dangerous pressure on local resources. If native corn or wild quelites begin to fetch high prices for use in tourist restaurants, there is a risk that communities will prefer to sell their nutritionally rich crops to obtain immediate cash income, replacing their own diet with ultra-processed foods and low-cost refined flours. This paradox forces us to rethink the gastronomic tourism model, as it cannot be based on exporting ingredients out of the communities or on their luxury consumption; rather, it must focus on a small-scale model that respects the seasons and is designed within the strict limits determined by the land itself and its inhabitants.

True gastronomic tourism in the highlands is that which supports family economies through trade (*korima*), promoting the preservation of the milpa as a way of life and not merely as a showcase attraction. Therefore, tourism projects managed directly by Rarámuri cooperatives in municipalities such as Guachochi, Urique, or Bocoyna demonstrate that it is possible to showcase highland cuisine in a dignified way— that is, where tourists sit at the table to hear stories of the harvest, understand the effort involved in fetching water from the ravine, and learn to value pinole not as a trendy superfood, but as the traditional food that embodies the dignity of a people. In this sense, proposing gastronomic tourism in Rarámuri territory opens up an ethical and cultural debate, given that Tarahumara cuisine is distinctly ceremonial, subsistence-based, and deeply private.

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the cultural customs of the Rarámuri represent one of the most profound expressions of biocultural resistance in Mexico, where gastronomy serves as a link to nature, their deities, and the territory of the Sierra Madre Occidental. Native corn, pinole, quelites, and *tesgüino* transcend the realm of cooking to become the core of their ceremonies, dances, and their worldview of community support (*korima*). Against this backdrop, culinary tourism presents an opportunity with the potential to serve as a showcase for cultural appreciation and a driver of equitable economic development for local communities, ensuring that profits directly benefit Rarámuri families; it is essential that initiatives prioritize low-impact, highly sensitive tourism.

REFERENCES

- Aguilera, S. (2023). Plant communication among the Rarámuri people: Dreams, songs, iconography, and the interconnected fabric. *Anthropol. Conscious*, 34(2), 508-526.
- Armendáriz, A. G. M., Fuentes, G. Á., Housni, F. E., & Cervantes, V. G. A. (2025). Prácticas alimentarias en una comunidad rarámuri de la Sierra de Chihuahua, México. *Anthropol. Food*, S18.
- Cárdenas-Carrión, Blanca María. (2014). Construcciones culturales del sabor: comida Rarámuri. *Anales De Antropología*, 48 (1): 33-57.

- Creel. <https://www.creelsierratarahumara.com/profile/contacto/profile> (consultado 20 de junio de 2026).
- Díaz, Selene, & Esquivel García, Paul E.. (2026). I’m Not an India, I’m a Tarahumara: Images and Narratives by Rarámuri people in Ciudad Juárez. *Frontera Norte*, 38, e2433.
- Fournier-García, P and Mondragón-Barrios, L. (2012). Las bebidas mexicanas. Pulque, mezcal y tesguino. *Arqueología Mexicana*, 114, 53-59.
- Indigenousmexico. <https://www.indigenousemexico.org/articles/indigenous-chihuahua-a-war-zone-for-three-centuries-2> (consultado 2 de junio de 2026).
- Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas. <https://www.gob.mx/inpi/articulos/etnografia-del-pueblo-tarahumara-raramuri> (consultado 5 de junio de 2026).
- Lieberman, D. E., Mahaffey, M., Quimare, S. C., Holowka, N. B., Wallace, I. J., Baggish, A. L., Ijäs, M., Levi, J. M., Liebenberg, L., Martin, D. Q., Morneau, J., Cortina, A. P. P., Willems, C., & Wyndham, F. S. (2020). Running in Tarahumara (Rarámuri) Culture: Persistence Hunting, Footracing, Dancing, Work, and the Fallacy of the Athletic Savage. *Curr. Anthropol.*, 61(3), 356–379.
- Martínez-Armendáriz, A. G., Álvarez Fuentes, G., and Ezzahra-Housni, F. and Virginia Gabriela Aguilera Cervantes, V. G. (2025). Prácticas alimentarias en una comunidad rarámuri de la Sierra de Chihuahua, México. *Anthropol. Food*, S18.
- Moreno-Calles, A.I. Casas, A. Rivero-Romero, A.D. Romero-Bautista, Y.A. Rangel-Landa, S. Fisher-Ortíz, R.A. Alvarado-Ramos, F. Vallejo-Ramos, M & Santos-Fita, D. (2016). Ethnoagroforestry: integration of biocultural diversity for food sovereignty in Mexico. *J Ethnobiol. Ethnomed.*, 12, 54.
- Piedepagina. <https://piedepagina.mx/farm-to-table-a-celebration-of-raramuri-gastronomy/> (consultado 20 de junio de 2026).
- Sabores de Méxicoy el Mundo. <https://lossaboresdemexico.com/comida-raramuri/> (consultado 1 de julio de 2026).
- Scholar archive. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/1309> (consultado 14 de junio de 2026).
- World cultures. <https://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/cultures/nu33/doc> (consultado 25 de mayo de 2026).