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Coca-Cola, Ramen and Anti-Histamines: *Eating Locally in Boim*

By Raphael Soifer

I've been a vegetarian since a couple of months before my ninth birthday. As I remember, all it took was a picture of a cute little calf—possibly on the wall of a butcher shop—to turn me from a burger-inhaling, chicken nugget-obsessed kid into a stubborn little model of pacifistic self control. I held firm even at a third grade hot dog cookout a few weeks after the big decision, where for lack of another option, I contented myself with ketchup and mustard sandwiches. I've downed plenty of soy burgers and “not dogs” in the intervening years, and I made it through high school on an unholy alliance of cheese subs and pizza slices, but I never felt the urge to back pedal.

Eating in Brazil has sometimes been a struggle, but in the worst cases, I've managed to content myself with rice and beans and maybe a little salad. Brazilian friends have tried to coax me into eating meat, protesting that local cows taste better than North American breeds, or that I won't really have experienced Brazil until I try their mother's *feijoada* (the unofficial national dish, a black bean cassoulet studded with sausages, bacon, pigs' ears, and any other cuts of pork that happen to be handy). Before I moved to the country's northeast, friends in São Paulo predicted that I wouldn't hold out for long against fresh local shrimp or *moqueca* (a seafood stew with a base of palm oil, coconut milk, and hot peppers, usually cooked inside a pumpkin). I didn't fall for it. After so many years without it, the idea of eating meat weirds me out. (Admittedly, it hasn't been the same way with all animal products. The first

house party I went to in Rio de Janeiro—with an entire table full of home-baked goodies doused in condensed milk—was the beginning of the end for my five dairy-free years as a vegan).

Yet as I got ready to move to Boim—the small village on the Tapajós river in western Pará state where I spent two months leading a theatre workshop with local kids—I tried to prepare myself for a dramatic dietary shift. My friend Liza, a Canadian river guide and long-time herbivore, had warned me that local families in the Amazon often welcomed her with a freshly killed chicken or armadillo. She hadn't wanted to embarrass anyone, or to seem too aloof to accept local food, so she ate everything anyone passed to her during the months she made her way through the region by canoe.

Friends in Belém, Pará's state capital, weren't as sure. “It's a nice idea, eating the way they eat in the village,” said Celi, who had recently given up meat. “But it's probably just fish, manioc root, and *açaí*,” the berry that's been an Amazonian staple for centuries, and to which

Oprah Winfrey is apparently a recent convert. “You can get by on manioc and *açaí*. No one will be offended—it just means more fish for them!”

I hoped Celi was right, but I didn't want to show up in Boim unprepared in case she wasn't. When I visited local street food stands during my final weeks in Belém, I occasionally passed up on *tacacá*—a sort of Amazonian hot-and-sour soup made with manioc broth and *jambú*, a local



An afternoon snack, caught by spear-fishing at the igarapé. (Photo by Alan Delon)



Playing a local version of kick-the-can with boimense cupboard staples: condensed milk and canned sausages.

herb that has a tingly, numbing effect—for a plate of *vatapá*, a yellow sludge made of coconut milk, peppers, and fish. I ordered my *vatapá* the same way as my *tacacá*—plenty of hot sauce, hold the shrimp garnish on top—but figured that the fish in the stew would help me re-acclimate my digestive system to meat without having to think about or taste it too much.

I'd planned to step up my meat-eating forays once I made it to Santarém, the river port city 12 hours north of Boim. But when I asked Magnolio, the project director for Saúde e Alegria (Project Health and Happiness, the NGO that connected me to Boim), he assured me that I had nothing to worry about. I'd be cooking for myself, he told me—the NGO had arranged for me to stay with their construction crew in the village priest's house—and I could find everything I needed from a couple of small general stores in the village. I took his advice happily, and kept on eating lunch at Santarém's sole vegetarian restaurant and snacking on shrimp-less *tacacá*.

When I got to Boim a week later, the local teenagers I'd met on the boat led me to Raeli's family's house. They hadn't yet confirmed things with the construction crew, they told me, so I spent a couple nights in my hammock in the family's living room. Lunch on my first day was a major production: rice, beans, potatoes, boiled pumpkin, and chunks of beef that Raeli had brought back from the city in a big styrofoam cooler. I braced myself and downed two small pieces of the meat, filling my fork with beans

and pumpkin to try to mask the taste. It wasn't too bad, although the sinewy texture was, frankly, pretty repulsive. When I looked around the table, though, I saw that no one was paying any attention. I figured that I could just as easily have skipped the beef without anybody noticing.

There were always plenty of non-meat options during my three days at the family's house. They had roast pork for dinner one night, but since Raeli's older sister had just made an *açaí* porridge from trees in the backyard, I stuck with that. I decided to come clean about my vegetarianism, since I was getting enough to eat without anyone making a special effort. Raeli's sister even mentioned that she'd be making *tucupi*—the manioc broth that forms the base of *tacacá*—but I never got to try her version, since she decided the next day that it was time for me to move to the priest's house. I'd been expecting the move, and since Felipe—her 19-year-old son—had just returned from Belém, it seemed logical to make a little space for him in a small house that was already sleeping nine or ten people. Still, Raeli's sister couldn't help harping on my strange ways as though I was being expelled. "At the priest's house, you'll always be able to sleep late." (I'd been forcing myself out of my hammock around 6:45 a.m., 45 minutes after most of the family woke up). "And you won't have to eat meat."

Actually, the five-man construction crew at the priest's house (three of whom left that weekend) thought I was pretty bizarre when I passed up on fried fish and freshly slaughtered chicken during our first few meals together. Even after I'd

explained my diet several times, they couldn't understand why anyone would stick to rice and beans, and kept giving me weird looks. After a couple of days, though, the crew chief decided I was OK. "It's just like it is with me and vegetables," Lindomar said. "I can't stand vegetables, but I've got nothing against it if other people want to eat 'em." His endorsement helped, along with the fact that, at lunch, I never competed with anyone for the best-looking fish.

The local diet in Boim was much better suited to Lindomar's culinary biases than to mine. There were always a couple of boats on the river, and village kids passed the priest's house on most mornings selling that day's catch for next to nothing. Men in Boim go out hunting pretty regularly, coming home with huge slabs of deer or wild boar, which they usually leave out in the sun. The meat gets swarmed by flies and biting ants, but apparently it's all part of the curing process. Since Boim only gets electricity for 90 minutes a night, none of the village households has a refrigerator. Folks use styrofoam containers filled with ice, which comes by boat from Santarém twice a week. The ice keeps meat or fish fresh for a bit, but any leftovers quickly go to waste.

Fruit is usually easy enough to find in the village. There are mango and cashew fruit trees all over Boim, along with other local fruit shrubs, and villagers pull down whatever's ripe whenever they feel like a snack. But beyond wimpy white potatoes, canned peas, and the occasional batch of bruised, unhappy looking tomatoes at Fé em Deus (Faith in God, the village's one-room general store), I had no way to satisfy my vegetable cravings.

Marileine, a local woman who looks after the priest's house (and takes care of the priest's pet monkey), was working as the cook and housekeeper for the construction crew, who were renovating an abandoned medical clinic that would be transformed into a telecommunications center. Marileine wasn't impressed with my bizarre habits at first. She couldn't believe that I didn't want to try her chicken, and she stood by the kitchen sink laughing at me when I volunteered to do the dishes (not something that men are supposed to do). After a couple days, she decided she was tired of making beans, and smirked as I got by on all-carb meals of rice, oily spaghetti, and manioc flour. When I woke up at 8:30 a.m. on a Saturday after a major night out by village standards—drinking cachaça and playing guitar on the village *praça* past 11 p.m. with some of the construction crew—she greeted me with an icy "good evening."

After about a week—possibly because of my persistent dish washing—Marileine warmed to me. She began bringing over carrots, potatoes and cabbage to add to the beans at lunch. One day, she even showed up with a plate of salad—cucumbers, tomatoes and boiled carrots—that "no one at home is going to eat." It was the most culinary variation I'd seen in at least a week.

Marileine usually snuck in vegetables every few days after that, but she never told me her sources. In the meantime, I continued on my dish-washing crusade, and even-

tually persuaded Marileine to let me make the beans (and occasionally the rice) for lunch every day. She still looked at me like I was freak, but she seemed happy to accept. Cooking is women's work in Boim, and given the lack of refrigeration and the number of mouths to feed in any given household, it's a full-time job.

IT GETS HOT IN THE UPPER Tapajós region, especially during the June - December dry season. With no electric fans or air conditioning, Boim has a much different relation to the heat and humidity than Belém, where I'd always been able to duck into air conditioning, or at least turn up my bedroom fan full blast. In Boim, I coped with the heat by lying in the shade in my green cotton hammock, and by developing a secret addiction to Coca-Cola. It's something I hardly ever touch when I have access to my own refrigerator, but it was a major draw when I found that a couple of local stores kept old-style glass bottles of the stuff relatively cool in outdated deep freezers powered by their own diesel generators.

Still accustomed to the anonymity of the city, and a bit embarrassed to have turned so quickly into a soft-drink enthusiast, I kept my Coke fixation to myself for a week or so, ducking into Fé em Deus most afternoons to gulp down a cool one. As I got to know the village kids better, though, I realized how urban and selfish I was being by indulging only myself. Most of the villagers, especially the local teenagers, are at least as sugar-addled as I was, and it wasn't a strain for me to spring for the occasional two-liter bottle of soda for my new friends, along with the inevitable pack of sandwich cookies.

Carlos, one of my teenage buddies, always volunteered to run to the general store to pick up soda and cookies for



Cradling a somewhat icy bottle of Tuchaau during a party at the village priest's house.



me and whoever else happened to be hanging out at the priest's house. Some days, he'd even come up with two *reais*, half the cost of a two-liter bottle of soda. On the days I produced the cash, Carlos would run out the door as quickly as he could to try to pretend that he didn't hear me calling for him to pick up guaraná (a soft drink made out of Amazonian berries of the same name, and popular throughout Brazil) instead of the orange Fanta that he and most other village kids preferred.

Boim's sugar fixation may be one of its most classically Brazilian traits: the whole country has had an insatiable sweet tooth for centuries, based largely on the need for

local consumption of the product that first turned Brazil's economy international. In Brazil's northeast, still the center of the country's sugar production, local products like *rapadura* (hard candy made out of dried brown sugar) and *caldo de cana* (fresh sugarcane juice) are unavoidable. There have never been sugar cane plantations near the Tapajós River, though, so the sweet stuff comes from factories in Belém or Manaus (each two days by boat from Santarém) or beyond. Sugar is a local staple, to be sure, but it still has a slightly exotic feel to it.

At least when it comes to treats, *boimenses* tend to prefer whatever seems less local. On my first weekend, JUSC—the local youth group coordinating my stay in Boim—held a series of events to celebrate its one-year anniversary. Kids sold cassava cake and skewers of locally raised chicken to community members during the interval between Padre Sidney's prayer service and the heavy-metal praise-music concert that drew a big crowd to the Catholic Church on a Saturday night. The cassava cake was some of the best I've had, from local roots (with plenty of "imported" sugar) and a secret recipe that the kids claimed went back several generations. But at JUSC's members-only celebration the next day, the centerpiece was a heavily frosted angel-food cake made by a local woman who had studied baking in Santarém. Her handiwork showed up again during Boim's kindergarten and eighth-grade graduation ceremonies, and was apparently at the two local weddings in December (I wasn't invited to either one). Cassava cake is fine as a last-minute treat, I learned, but a real party has to feature something that looks like it came from a fancy supermarket in Santarém.

"City food" is something village kids spend a lot of time considering. On our way back from the *igarapé*—an offshoot of a major river—at northern end of Boim, Carlos and Ralph asked if there was anything to eat back at the priest's house. "Just rice and beans," I told them.

"What's that?" Carlos asked sarcastically. "I've never heard of that. I only eat sandwiches and burgers."

"And lasagna," Ralph smirked. "Or pizza. Don't you have anything else?"

"We've got some eggs," I said. "And manioc flour."

Carlos nodded slowly. "I know eggs. But what's manioc flour?"



Kindergarten graduation in Boim, complete with frosted angel food cake. (Photo by Carlos)

ioc? Have you ever heard of that, Ralph?"

"Manioc? No. Just pizza."

I played along. "Is there a lot of pizza in Boim?"

"Of course, gringo!" Carlos laughed. "We sell pizza at my house!"

Until I left the village in early January, Carlos and Ralph insisted that they'd tricked me into believing that I could find "city food" in Boim. Since I was a dependable supplier of sugar highs, they seemed to think I'd bring some other sophisticated culinary tricks with me to the village. The boys were frequent lunchtime visitors at the priest's house, especially after I took over cooking the beans. They may just have been after another meal—they're 17 and 15, after all. But I got the sense that they were waiting for me to move beyond typical local food, that they expected me to somehow whip up a pizza out of ingredients from Fé em Deus, even though there's never any cheese in Boim. I was following basic social protocol by welcoming them and other village kids to lunch, and by paying for soda and cookies a few times a week. But by sticking to rice and beans, I wasn't quite living up to their expectations of an outsider,

especially an American. Couldn't I at least have improvised some hamburgers?

Dinners in Boim are almost always last-minute affairs that happen after the primetime *telenovela* ends around 9 p.m. and the village's TVs shut off. Usually, they consist of leftovers from lunch. This meant that if enough visitors showed up to the priest's house on a given afternoon, we'd only have fried fish and manioc flour at night. To make sure I'd have something to eat, I started stocking up on packets of ramen noodles from Fé em Deus, which miraculously sold a brand so chock-full of artificial ingredients that there was no room left for meat additives. Carlos got hip to it eventually, and ramen-and-scrambled eggs became my signature "special" dish for our occasional dinnertime guests. It didn't have the same cachet as the "American food" that local kids sometimes quizzed me on, but it was least as popular as my occasional soft-drink sprees.

EVERY NIGHT AT 7:30, WHEN Boim's generator powers up, men gather at the three bars on the village's central plaza to drink, talk football, and pretend not to be paying too much attention to the *novela*. There's cold beer on Wednesday and Saturday nights, after the boats from

Santarém bring in new shipments of ice, but it's expensive. For the most part, the bar crowd sticks to cachaça and *conhaque de alcatrão*, a smoky, low-priced "cognac" distilled from vegetable tar.

I'm an experienced bartender and—especially after my time in Brazil's hard-partying northeast—an able drinker. But since I was hanging out mostly with teenage members of JUSC, the church-based youth group, I barely touched alcohol while I was in Boim. Lindomar and Dorica, the two long-term members of the construction crew, reserved their drinking for the occasional weekend parties in neighboring villages, and I was happy to spend my "late" nights watching the end of the *novela* and then going home to read by candlelight after a dinner of leftovers or ramen.

Paulinho, a local guy who lives in a simple shack down the dirt road from the priest's house, was my closest contact with local bar culture. He had basically signed himself up to the construction crew early in the renovation project, and would work for almost 12 hours a day digging trenches around the old clinic, or leading Lindomar and Dorica into the forest for wood. Anytime he got his hands on extra money, though, Paulinho would disappear for day-long benders. Occasionally, we'd run into him outside the bars on the village plaza, or else he'd totter into the house at dinner and fill a plate with whatever was left on the stove, but otherwise he'd be lost to the bottle. This desperately determined binge drinking seemed to be the norm for many men in Boim. While I was in the village, I shared some beers with Lindomar and Dorica right after a fresh shipment of ice, and spent an afternoon sipping local "wine"—a cocktail made of tar cognac, condensed milk, and a duck egg—with Seu Edem, the community president. Otherwise, though, I turned down drinking invitations, knowing that I'd not only be expected to pick up the tab, but also to prove myself in the all-too-likely event of a brawl.

One night in early December, I woke up to a pitch-dark house, even though I'd left the bedroom window open. Lindomar and Dorica, who usually slept in the yard under a giant rubber tree, had moved their hammocks into the front room. When I wandered past Lindomar on the way to bathroom, he was already awake, probably as a result of

my banging around looking for a lighter to light my candle. "Sorry we closed your window," he said. "Paulinho showed up, and he was trashed. He started saying he was going to get his gun and kill somebody, so we thought it would be better if we moved inside."

In a village that sometimes seems to validate automatically anything that comes from the outside—like job opportunities, processed junk food, or gringo workshop leaders—alcohol is a key exception. It's not something that people liked to talk about with me. Marileine warned me directly about the problem drinkers in the village, and the kids made occasional oblique references to booze-fueled brawls.

It's not a pleasant village tradition, but it's pretty firmly entrenched in Boim. As with sugary soft drinks, ice, and canned meat, the cachaça and *conhaque de alcatrão* come in—by the crate—twice a week from Santarém.

ALAN DELON TOOK A BIG GULP from the two-liter bottle of orange soda. "*Fanta: o guarana da nossa terra*," he said, paraphrasing a slogan for Tuchaua, a painfully sweet soda that's unofficially proclaims itself the soft drink of Pará state. "The guaraná of our land."

I was following Alan Delon, Carlos, and Ralph on a sort of nature walk. The three teenagers had agreed to take me deeper into the forest, since I'd only made it as far as the soccer field at the edge of the village. In

return, of course, I'd picked up a couple packs of chocolate sandwich cookies, as well as the orange Fanta that Carlos insisted on, in spite of my pleas for Tuchaua. It wasn't the supposedly local flavor I was after; I just wanted a change in routine. Also, the chunky sediment that settles in the bottom of Fanta bottles as they reach their expiration date—which is inevitably how they arrive in Boim—was starting to gross me out.

I'd been in Boim for more than a month by the time I made it out into the forest. I'd hoped to go earlier, but Dona Josiane, the nurse at the publically funded village clinic, had forbidden me after my whole torso broke out during my first weekend. She told me it was probably just some kind of insect that had crawled on me when I was sleeping, and assured me that my immune system would toughen up



Carlos climbs a tree in the forest to throw down pororoça, a local fruit. He's about 20 feet up in this picture.



Ralph emerges from a village igarapé with essential outdoor supplies: a two-liter bottle of Fanta in a plastic bag.

the longer I stayed in the Boim. Hers had, she said, in the year since she moved to the village from Santarém. Then she hooked me up to a mini-IV filled with a powerful anti-histamine, and sent me home with an armload of creams and syrups. "Come straight to me if it gets worse," she said, smiling sweetly and not betraying any sense of urgency.

As soon as I showed her the damage, Josiane asked if I'd eaten any local game. It was a common enough reaction, she said. As a transplant from Santarém, and the only full-time village resident with a professional degree, Josiane represents an urban, modern perspective that's otherwise hard to come across in the village, and that's often in direct opposition to Boim's traditions. She was probably the only person in the village who didn't do a double take

when I assured her that I hadn't eaten game, or any meat at all, though she did spend the next couple of months fretting about my protein intake.

On Boim's tables, appetite and authenticity are often in conflict with one another. When village men go into the forest to hunt, they still leave offerings for the *curupira*, an indigenous spirit that defends local wildlife. Yet for the past several decades, more villagers have begun clearing land to raise cattle, a more reliable and "modern" form of meat. The pastures are at least an hour's walk into the forest; my three teenage "guides" pointed toward them during our nature walk, and I thought I heard some moo-ing, although I couldn't see the fields behind the thick trees. Cattle farming in the Amazon is a controversial subject; beef companies have been devastating the forest for decades. In Boim, though, the pastures seem almost like an extension of manioc farming, a slash-and-burn agriculture that's been the basis of local food for centuries.

I never sampled the local beef, even after I started to rack up lunch and dinner invitations toward the end of my stay in the village. Instead, I stuck with rice and beans, praised the potato-and-canned-pea salads perhaps a bit too outlandishly, and loaded up on homemade fruit pastes for dessert. After all, I figured that the locals—and especially the schoolchildren who actually made time to hang out with me—weren't interested in seeing me fit in to their accustomed daily life. They were much more interested in my own quirky stories of city life, especially when I told those stories over a pack of cookies and a two-liter bottle of Fanta. □



Sharing a village footpath with part of a local herd. (Photo by Rick Rafael)

Current Fellows

Elena Agarkova • RUSSIA

May 2008 - 2010

Elena is living in Siberia, studying management of natural resources and the relationship between Siberia's natural riches and its people. Previously, Elena was a Legal Fellow at the University of Washington's School of Law, at the Berman Environmental Law Clinic. She has clerked for Honorable Cynthia M. Rufe of the federal district court in Philadelphia, and has practiced commercial litigation at the New York office of Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy LLP. Elena was born in Moscow, Russia, and has volunteered for environmental non-profits in the Lake Baikal region of Siberia. She graduated from Georgetown University Law Center in 2001, and has received a bachelor's degree in political science from Barnard College.

Pooja Bhatia • HAITI

September 2008 - 2010

Pooja attended Harvard as an undergraduate, and then worked for the *Wall Street Journal* for a few years. She graduated from Harvard Law School. She was appointed Harvard Law School Satter Human Rights Fellow in 2007 and worked as an attorney with the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux, which advocates and litigates on behalf of Haiti's poor.

Eve Fairbanks • SOUTH AFRICA

May 2009 - 2011

Eve is a *New Republic* staff writer interested in character and in how individuals fit themselves into new or changing societies. Through that lens, she will be writing about medicine and politics in the new South Africa. At the *New Republic*, she covered the first Democratic Congress since 1992 and the 2008 presidential race; her book reviews have also appeared in the *New York Times*. She graduated with a degree in political science from Yale, where she also studied music.

Ezra Fieser • GUATEMALA

January 2008 - 2010

Ezra is interested in economic and political changes in Central America. He is an ICWA fellow living in Guatemala where he will write about the country's rapidly changing economic structure and the effects on its politics, culture and people. He was formerly the deputy city editor for *The News Journal* (Wilmington, DE), a staff writer for *Springfield Republican* (Springfield, MA) and a Pulliam Fellow at *The Arizona*

Republic. He is a graduate of Emerson College in Boston.

Suzy Hansen • TURKEY

April 2007 - 2009

A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzy will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the *New York Observer*, her work has also appeared in *Salon*, the *New York Times* Book Review, the *Nation*, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

Cecilia Kline • CENTRAL AMERICA

January 2009 - 2011

Cecilia is a graduate of Georgetown University, Loyola University Chicago School of Law, and the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration. In 2007 she began with Casa Alianza in Tegucigalpa, Honduras providing outreach for youth living on the street. As an ICWA Fellow she will write about youth-service programs from several Central American cities as a participant observer.

Derek Mitchell • INDIA

September 2007 - 2009

As a Phillips Talbot Fellow, Derek will explore the impact of global trade and economic growth on Indians living in poverty. He has served for the past year as a volunteer for Swaraj Peeth, an institute in New Delhi dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution and Mahatma Gandhi's thought. Previously he was a Fulbright scholar in India at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He has coordinated foreign policy research at George Washington University's Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and worked as a political organizer in New Hampshire. Derek graduated with a degree in religion from Columbia University.

Raphael Soifer • BRAZIL

April 2007-2009

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