

Fabiola's Good Life

“LIFE AS I GREW UP AND AS I KNEW IT AS A HOME ECONOMIST was rich but simple. People drew their sustenance from the soil and from the spirit. Life was good, but not always easy. There were crop failures resulting from nature’s unpredictable ways; there were family concerns, despair alternating with hope. Faith was deep, though, and having faith could bring the hope of better things—a hope for life that was good.”

—From the preface to *The Good Life*
by Fabiola C. de Baca Gilbert
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by Susan Pieper

A young girl’s heart lay a three-day carriage ride from Las Vegas, New Mexico. “The whole world seems to be there,” she said. “Full of promise and gladness”

There, in the vast Llano, grew a remarkable woman who was full of promise for every life she touched, for she had so much to teach us all. Her life span reached from the 1890s frontier to the 1990s, though its essence begins in the time New Mexico was a Spanish colony.

As a missionary for the good life during her career, she took the University to many northern New Mexicans for the first time. Her message later reached out to an Indian village in Mexico at the request of the United Nations. In retirement she trained Peace Corps volunteers, who extended her influence around the world. Her special zeal could only have been born of her colonial roots, and it put a unique New Mexico stamp on the Cooperative Extension Service.

Doña Fabiola:
A missionary of and to New Mexico.

"Fabiola really understood land-grant colleges and the importance of outreach," remembers her cousin, New Mexico state representative J. Paul Taylor.

She was a missionary, too, on behalf of our native New Mexico heritage, preserving its food and way of life in three books that offer glimpses of the best of the past that preceded the Anglo world that gradually enveloped her New Mexico. Her *Historic Cookery* is the wellspring that present and future New Mexican restaurants and cookbook authors—as well as anyone striving to find traditional New Mexico in a dish—draw from.

In *The Good Life*, she showed a talent for developing characters, leaving us a warm glimpse of the northern New Mexico villages she met as an Extension professional. Her gift for expressive prose shines in *We Fed Them Cactus*, which put a rare and personal eye on the rough and ready territorial era of New Mexico.

Fabiola Cabeza de Baca was born to a rugged sort of privilege. She grew up on what was once part of *Las Vegas Grandes*, a half-million acres the young Republic of Mexico granted her family in 1823, two generations before her birth. Throughout her childhood, she was regaled with tales of her forebears whose sporting life included lancing bison on the plains.

Life for these cattle barons was not sheltered. The day of her brother's birth is remembered for an encounter with a horse dragging the dead victim of an outlaw band. Three years later in 1894, Fabiola was born on the Llano, of which she wrote with great affection in *We Fed Them Cactus*.

It is a lonely land because of its immensity, but it lacks nothing for those who enjoy Nature in her full grandeur. The colors of the skies, of the hills, the rocks, the birds and the flowers, are soothing to the most troubled heart. It is loneliness without despair ...



Mary Taylor

...For miles and miles, as far as the eye can see, is the expanse of level land. Here are mesquite, prickly pear, yucca, and grass, grass, grass.

Fabiola was not only a child of the land. Part of a patrón's family, she was molded after her mother's death by her grandmother, Estafana Delgado C. de Baca.

Remembered as highly religious and a stern disciplinarian, Estafana kept her granddaughters busy cooking, sewing, and doing other household work. She also imparted the role of a patrón's wife, as Fabiola remembered:

As did my grandmother, all the wives of the patróns held a very important place in the villages and ranches on the Llano. The patrón ruled the rancho, but his wife looked after the spiritual and physical welfare of the empleados and their families. She was the first one called when there was death, illness, misfortune or good tidings in a family. She was a great social force in the community—more so than her husband. She held the purse strings, and thus she was able to do as she pleased in her charitable enterprises and to help those who might seek her assistance...

The women in these isolated areas had to be resourceful in every way. They were their own doctors, dressmakers, tailors and advisors...

Without the guidance and comfort of the wives and mothers, life on the Llano would have been unbearable, and a great debt is owed to the brave, pioneer women who ventured into the cruel life of the plains, far from contact with the outside world.

The de Bacas courted the outside world through education. Estafana Delgado de Baca surrounded herself with people who had all the education available at the time, says Robert C. de Baca, Fabiola's nephew. This legacy came from her mother, Maria de la Luz Baca, who

Quotations reprinted from *We Fed Them Cactus* (second edition, 1994) by permission of The University of New Mexico Press.

“A storm on the Llano is beautiful. The lightning comes down like arrows of fire and buries itself on the ground. At the pealing of thunder, the bellowing of cattle fills the heart of the listeners with music. A feeling of gladness comes over one as the heavens open in downpour to bathe Mother Earth.”



taught her servants' children to read. Fabiola's grandfather and his brothers studied with the Jesuits in Durango, Mexico, and her father went to St. Joseph, Mo. to learn Anglo-American business ways. Fabiola and her brother Luis eventually studied in Madrid, Spain.

But Fabiola's generation began their formal education much earlier. When Fabiola, Luis, and their two sisters reached school age, their grandparents moved permanently to Las Vegas. The girls attended Loretto Academy, and Luis attended the Christian Brothers' school. They all spent their summer vacations on their father's ranch.

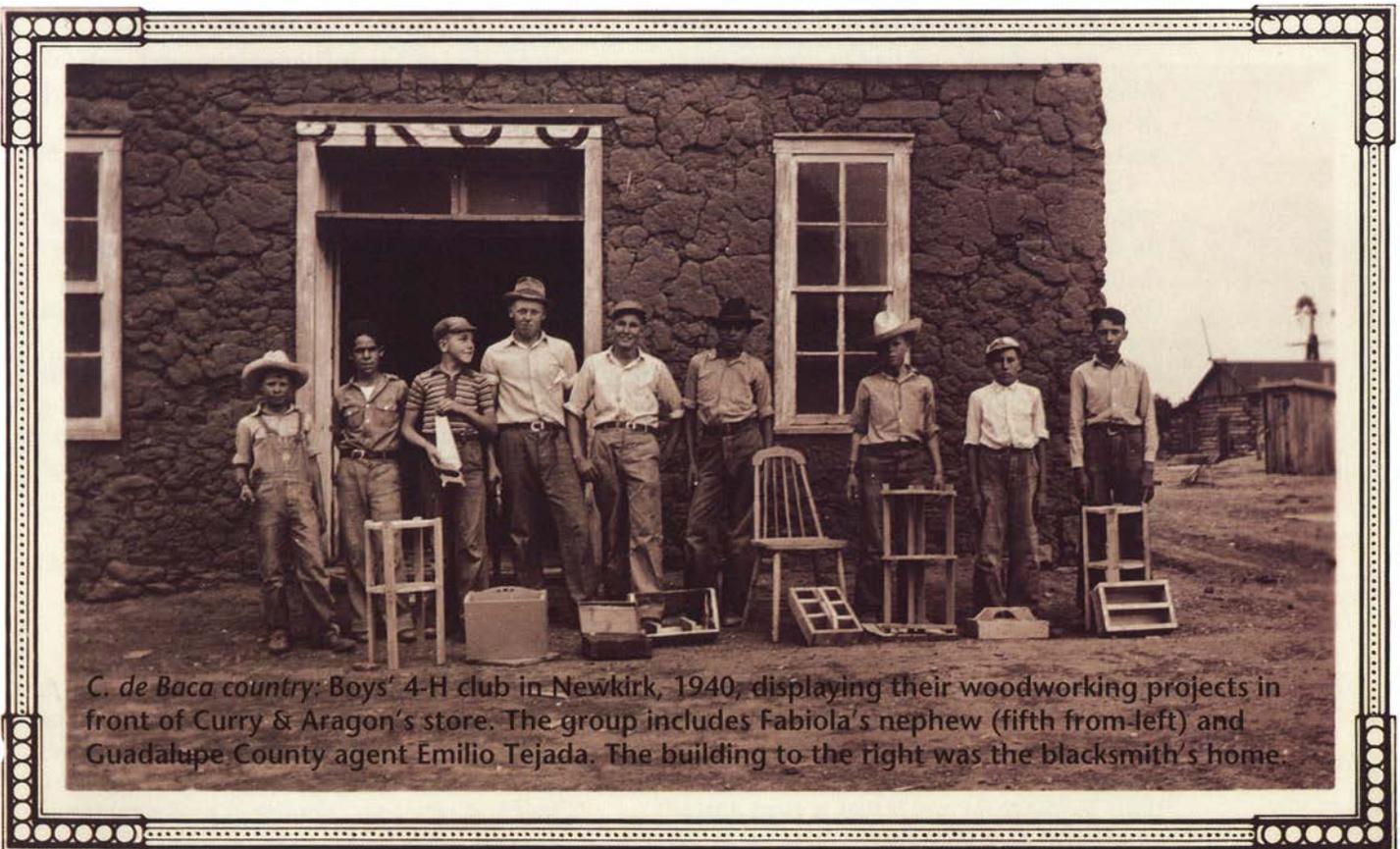
At the ranch, household chores were minimal, and Fabiola often rode across the land with her father. In the evenings, the ranch hands entertained themselves and the children

with tales of Indian raids, buffalo hunters, and New Mexico's notorious outlaws. Stories of dances, weddings, and lost loves also stirred their imaginations.

As the summers passed, Fabiola saw the advent of the railroad over the plains in 1905, with the homesteaders it brought to the Llano. She also witnessed the change her father made from longhorns to Hereford cattle and the subsequent fencing of the range. The summer days were long, but the season always ended too quickly for Fabiola.

My summer vacations seemed so short, and before I realized, I had to go back to school and leave the land that I loved.

The trip of about one hundred miles to Las Vegas, by carriage, took two to three days,



C. de Baca country: Boys' 4-H club in Newkirk, 1940, displaying their woodworking projects in front of Curry & Aragon's store. The group includes Fabiola's nephew (fifth from-left) and Guadalupe County agent Emilio Tejada. The building to the right was the blacksmith's home.



“...it was with deep regret that I bade goodbye to the children. As I look back to my first year of teaching, I know that I have never been happier and I have never been among people who were more hospitable, genuine and wholesome than those who lived on the Ceja.”

depending on the horses and, of course, the weather. We had prepared for the journey such food as could not be cooked over a campfire. Coffee had to be ground and bread baked for our three meals each day.

The trip was delightful. We were up at dawn in order to take advantage of the hours of coolness, and naturally we had to cover as many miles as possible during the day. Thirty miles in one day was average travel, but fast horses might make forty. ...

Our stopping place for the night was determined by the availability of water pasturage for the horses. If rain overtook us, we had to seek shelter in a house. I liked it better when we stopped under the sky for a roof. Sleeping with the stars above was more interesting and cooler, also. How peaceful it was outdoors! The horses were hobbled, so that they might not wander too far, and often a cowbell was tied to the neck of one of the horses. The sound of the bell and the hobbled horses is the sweetest lullaby I have ever heard. A distant, or sometimes near, howling of the coyotes was the only other sound which might break the silence of the great outdoors. ...

After she completed Normal School, Fabiola came home to the rancho at Newkirk. One of the school directors soon asked her to teach in the local district.

Papa was not so sure that it was the proper thing for me to do and it took a great deal of pleading to gain his consent. In giving it, he

stressed that if I signed a contract I had to live up to it and, whether I liked it or not, I had to stay the full seven months. He was certain that after I found out what the environment held for me I would repent, but I was determined to keep my word. ...

...The joy of teaching and helping those around us, although I had hardly realized what it meant except in ideal surroundings, was my ambition for the moment. ...

The one-room school stood in a lonely spot among the juniper and piñons with Mesa Rica as a background. It was built of rock with four narrow windows, two on each side. The room was so devoid of furniture that a weaker heart might have been disillusioned, but I remembered my promise and papa's warning.

Fabiola and the children cleaned the schoolhouse and yard, and soon she was teaching a full curriculum, complete with Thanksgiving and Christmas programs. Though she was boarding with a family who lived near the school, she made overnight visits to many of the children's families.

... I am sure that I underwent one of the best educations anyone could receive. I learned the customs, food habits, religions, languages, and folkways of different national groups. They were all simple, wholesome people living from the soil. They certainly were a hardy lot, for otherwise they would not have survived the cruelty of the wind, the droughts and the poverty which surrounded most of them. They asked my advice on many subjects but I never felt capable of giving it to them. My education was from books; theirs came the hard way. It was superior to mine.

As Fabiola learned of this simple good life, her students eagerly learned reading, spelling, history, grammar, arithmetic, physiology, penmanship, and geography. Her bilingual reading class seemed ahead of its time.

We had bi-lingual readers for the primary grades. These were the adopted texts of that day. In this way, the English speaking children learned Spanish and the Spanish-speaking learned English.

The best method for teaching reading was for the pupils to read aloud. This was done in order to teach correct pronunciation of the languages. The Spanish-speaking pupils in all the grades had had very poor training in pronunciation, and the beginners knew not one word of English.



Fabiola's luggage: Extension agents brought canning equipment (left) to rural counties that could not afford their own. Retorts, pressure cookers, kettles, and boxes of cans were all part of the equipment. One day's effort (below) yielded 800 filled cans.

Preserving the catch (bottom two photos): Fish and meat were often canned, as well as fruits and vegetables. Members of the Taos Women's Club produced 216 cans of fish in one day.

It is amazing how well both groups learned each other's language in just seven months of school.

Fabiola taught school in the district for a total of 11 years, interspersed with time spent earning a bachelor's degree in education from Highlands University in Las Vegas and a year studying at Centro de Estudios Historicos in Madrid, Spain.

In 1927, she enrolled in NMSU's home economics department to work on another bachelor's degree. While attending college, Fabiola taught Spanish classes, which were attended by former Extension director W.L. Elser. He approached her about the possibility of working in Extension.

Upon graduation, she began her new career—her new mission—to bring a bit of the good life through her Extension education demonstrations and programs. Within months, she became district agent for Santa Fe County and the southern section of Rio Arriba County. Around this time she married her longtime beau, Carlos Gilbert.

The Sept. 1929 edition of *New Mexico Extension News* introducing Fabiola to New Mexico's Extension clients described her as "well fitted for her position, having taught school for several years and being thoroughly familiar with the Spanish language and Spanish-speaking people."

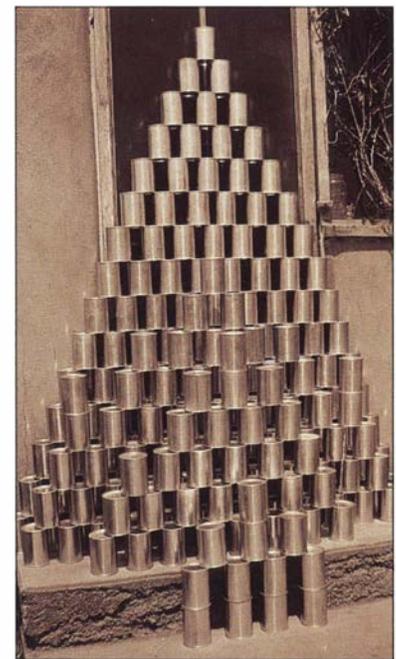
Charged with teaching everything from food preservation and preparation to sanitation procedures and pest control, Fabiola brought her special vision to neighborhood meetings, local organizations, and households across the state. The task encompassed not only a broad range of material, but also a vast stretch of New Mexico's landscape. In 1947 she became district home demonstration agent at large for six counties. At its largest, her territory stretched from Dulce, on the Colorado border, to Vaughn, almost halfway down the state to the southeast.

Except for Santa Fe, Taos, and Bernalillo, the communities Fabiola worked in were all



small and rural and included several pueblos. Many residents spoke only Spanish or their native Indian dialects. They had few amenities now taken for granted, such as running water, paved roads, electricity, or telephones. With no supermarkets, people ate what they grew or what was grown locally. Their only means of food preservation was drying, fresh fruits and vegetables were strictly seasonal, and fresh meat was available only immediately after butchering.

Food preservation became an important aspect of Fabiola's work. Because she



A Taste of the Land

FROM *The Good Life: New Mexico Traditions and Food* by Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert. Museum of New Mexico Press. pp. 8-10. Second printing, second edition, 1986. Reprinted by permission.

In her 1981 preface to *The Good Life*, Fabiola C. de Baca wrote, "This simple story of the Turrieta family, the family in *The Good Life*, revolves around the observances and traditions of what could have been any Hispanic family in a New Mexico village during that period of my work as a home economist. The same pattern of life is followed today in many isolated New Mexico villages.

"...The fondest memories of my life are associated with the people among whom I have worked. The ways of life expressed in the book and the recipes which are a part of those lives have helped make for me *The Good Life*."

[At breakfast, Doña Paula said to her husband, Don Teodoro,]

"We have five sacks of green chile to roast and peel before the day is over and although there is a lot of work involved, how good it will taste to us next winter when we cannot go out in the garden to pick it fresh."

Don Teodoro, before breakfast, had built a big wood fire in the outdoor mud oven in order to have plenty of coals for the roasting of the peppers.

On the patio sat Doña Paula clipping the end of each pod to keep it from bursting with the heat and before the oven was hot, she had all the peppers ready for roasting. The wood in the oven soon turned into bright red coals which made it just right for blistering the skins.

Doña Paula took a basketful of the chile and emptied it into the coals. With a stick she carefully turned the peppers until they were browned on all sides; then she took them out, put them into a pan, sprinkled them with water and covered them. This was done so that the peppers would steam and make them easier to peel. The oven was quickly filled each time it was emptied, keeping Doña

Paula busy all morning.

Although the family had been up since dawn, yet every minute counted towards finishing the day's tasks.

"While the chile is steaming," commanded Doña Paula to her children, "Go to the field and pick red peppers. Frost will be here before we know it and with you in school, I shall be left with all the work."

In less than an hour, a batch of roasted peppers were ready and the job of peeling occupied every member of the family except Don Teodoro and José. They were out in the field cutting green corn for drying.

How skillfully the women went at their task of peeling chile without a pod being torn by their agile fingers. While her daughters, María, Rosa and Cuca peeled peppers, Doña Paula strung the pods by the stems; when she had a string three feet long, she went to the yard and hung it from a line. The green strings blended beautifully with the red ones which Don Teodoro had hung out in the early morning.

Everytime the oven was emptied, it was replenished by a new supply of peppers, keeping the women busy all day. Doña Paula stopped occasionally, but just long enough to put a stick of wood in the kitchen stove for the beans to be ready for the noon day meal.

... As the sun climbed up in the sky, the early risers began to feel the pangs of hunger and with the odor of roasting chile the gastric juices began to flow freely. Doña Paula, who knew well when her family was hungry, took a pan full of roasted peppers and went into the kitchen and soon the odor of freshly cooking tortillas, the flat bread which she cooked on top of the stove, reached the workers out in the yard. The beans had been cooking in the Indian earthenware pot since early morning.

was the first Extension agent assigned to any of the pueblos and the first agent to work specifically with Hispanic women in northern New Mexico, she became the first to introduce the people to canning. With the purchase of community canning equipment, this became an important source of food during the Depression.

Fabiola made sure Spanish was a language of learning throughout her long career. In 1950, she expanded her mission to the Tarascan Indians in the state of Michoacan, Mexico. There she set up demonstration centers to train women, some who had never eaten a hot meal, in household skills. Within six months, she started centers in 18 villages.



Don Teodoro must have smelled the food, for he was on his way towards the house when Doña Paula called, "Dinner is ready. Cuca, call your father and José."

A happy family sat down for their noonday meal. Every morsel of food had come from their land and that made Don Teodoro very proud.

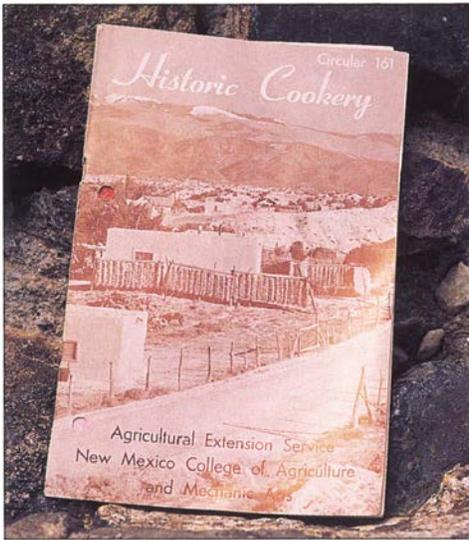
As part of this United Nations project, she prepared a nutrition guide in Spanish.

Others took advantage of Fabiola's linguistic skills when she helped make a 4-H club movie in Spanish and assisted with an educational film, *Preservation of Basic Foods*, with Spanish subtitles. At NMSU, she published two Spanish-language Extension circulars that were

distributed widely in New Mexico and other locations where Spanish is spoken.

For 20 years, Fabiola wrote a weekly homemakers' column in *El Nuevo Mexicano*, a Spanish-language newspaper in Santa Fe, where she also broadcast weekly programs over radio station KVSF. She also wrote numerous feature stories for the *Santa Fe New Mexican*.

Fall in Northern New Mexico by Glen Strock, who illustrated the cover of *The Good Life* (represented by Preusser Galleries, Taos, NM).



Before World War II, Fabiola learned several pueblo dialects, making it possible for her to reach 80 percent of the families in Santa Fe County—an extraordinary achievement in crossing ethnic barriers.

Early in her career, Fabiola made what is arguably her most far-reaching contribution—publishing recipes for New Mexican foods. She explained her reasons for undertaking the project in a letter written to John White, Extension editor, in 1964, just five years after she retired:

Among old papers, I believe Mrs. Ivy Yoast found a thesis written on Mexican foods with recipes. These were passed on to me and I did not think they were typical of New Mexico. In my opinion they were more suited to Mexican cookery which of course fit in ... part of New Mexico.

Mrs. Yoast, who was then Extension Editor, suggested that I take it over and work it so that it would serve all parts of New Mexico.

I did work on it, changing most of the recipes and adding some others. It was then mimeo-

graphed for several issues. I do not remember the date but it must have been in 1930 or 31.

The mimeographed copies became popular and it was then decided that it was worth printing, which the Extension Service did.

...To my knowledge Historic Cookery is the earliest cook book of New Mexican foods ever written.

...Not a day goes by that I do not get calls for Historic Cookery by phone, letters, etc.

In its first 17 years more than 10,000 copies of *Historic Cookery* were distributed. According to Palemon Martinez, a former Extension district director, the publication popularized cooking with chile, and led directly to American's love of native New Mexican foods today. Many of the recipes were heirlooms from Fabiola's family, and cooks still refer to her recipes for authenticity. In fact, a 1966 Extension news release concerning the correct spelling of "chile" called Fabiola "a recognized authority on New Mexico foods."

Travis Nelson, retired agent from Quay County, remembers Fabiola's love for traditional village life. At a 4-H achievement program she attended with Fabiola at the San Ildefonso pueblo, the children displayed the clay pots and dolls they had made. The whole village helped prepare a meal for the crowd, the men making a fire outdoors under a large pot of lard for sopaipillas.

As her formal career drew to a close, Fabiola's achievements were recognized by her peers as a special link with traditional New Mexico. One citation noted that she had "absorbed the customs, language, culi-



At home with the culture: Fabiola's home (above, ca. 1936) featured native crafts, including hand-carved furniture and vigas, tinwork picture frames and candle holders, and light fixtures of hand-wrought iron. Members of the Acoma Pueblo 4-H club exhibited pottery (right) made for club projects.





Cerro Ladies Club (ca. 1933): Fabiola was the first Extension professional to reach women of northern New Mexico.

nary knowledge, and love of the land that her ancestors brought into New Mexico in the 17th century.”

Fabiola’s missionary zeal—fueled by her heritage, upbringing, education, and experience—is still bright in the minds of her colleagues. Tony Romo, former agent in Mora County, recalls that Fabiola thoroughly believed in a one-on-one, hands-on approach. A self-determined, independent woman, she had an enthusiasm for sharing knowledge. “She was a lady for the times. She had pioneer qualities—what it took to get Extension started in those early years in New Mexico,” he says.

Former county agents recall how after losing a leg in a train accident, Fabiola relied on drivers or buses for transportation between county offices. Once she arrived in a county, the agents drove her from town to town. As they drove, she imparted her philosophy of Extension to them and then made it come to life as she worked with the people.

Herman Baca, a former Extension district director, was recruited to drive the woman he calls “one of the greatest Extension people New Mexico has had.” The two were the first from Extension to enter the closed city of Los Alamos, where they started 4-H and Extension clubs. He remembers going with her to the Santa Clara and San Juan pueblos, where she spoke the native dialects.

Aubrey Notman, former home economist in Valencia County, remembers Fabiola’s efforts after World War II, when she helped people in the region build their pride again by improving their homes that had become run down during the war.

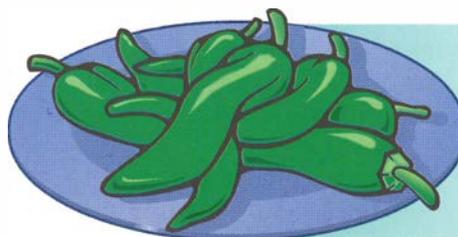
Because Fabiola seemed to know everything, she was treated like a queen by the agents, says Mary Olguin, who worked as an Extension home economist with Fabiola and remains a volunteer in the program today. “Extension was her life. Fabiola was willing to give all of herself, and that motivated people to do things for themselves. She loved people and wanted to see them achieve,” she says.

Even today in New Mexico, Fabiola’s legacy of the good life lives on in people like Olguin.

In her introduction to *Historic Cookery*, Fabiola wrote:

Guisar, which has no exact English equivalent, is the most popular word in the native homemaker’s vocabulary. Roughly translated, it means to dress up food, perhaps only by adding a little onion or a pinch of oregano; good food always deserves a finishing touch. Food must never taste flat, but it will—if it’s not guisado.

Priscilla Grijalva, former Extension agent, described Fabiola’s presentations as *sabrosa*—which translates as “savory, palatable, delightful, or pleasurable to the mind.” The spice, the *guisar*, that Fabiola brought to New Mexico Extension—her heritage, her energy, her dedication—is a legacy that will endure.



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