

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

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Rosalee de la Forêt:

Hello, and welcome to the herbs with Rosalee podcast, a show exploring how herbs heal as medicine, as food, and through nature connection. I'm your host Rosalee de la Foret. I created this YouTube channel to share trusted herbal wisdom so that you can get the best results when relying on herbs for your health. I love offering up practical knowledge to help you dive deeper into the world of medicinal plants and seasonal living.

Each episode of the Herbs with Rosalee podcast is shared on YouTube as well as your favorite podcast app. Transcripts and recipes for each episode can be found at herbswithRosaleepodcast.com or through the link in the video description. Also in the video description, you'll find other helpful resources. For example, to get my best herbal tips as well as fun bonuses, be sure to sign up for my weekly herbal newsletter. Okay. Grab your cup of tea and let's dive in.

I am so thrilled to bring you this conversation with Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz. For those of you who don't know Felicia, she is an author, indigenous food activist, natural food chef and curandera, a Mexican traditional healer, educating and supporting others in reclaiming the kitchen healer approach to health with indigenous wisdom and whole food cooking.

Her holistic wellness background spans over 25 years in which she has had the opportunity to work with grassroots or activists, tribal leaders, top wellness resorts, and professional athletes, helping people reconnect to their ancestral foods, earth medicines, and health practices. Felicia's work has been featured in Spirituality and Health, Food and Wine, Bon Appetit and many other media platforms, including the original Americans episode on Padma Lakshmi's Taste the Nation, which is found on Hulu.

Felicia presents frequently around the country on Native American healing practices, holistic wellness, and Native American food, sustainability, at community events, universities, and museums, including the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. Well, welcome to the Herbs with Rosalee podcast, Felicia. I am so glad that you're here.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Thank you. I'm so glad that I'm here with you.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Well, I want to just jump right in and hear how you got started on your path to becoming a curandera.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

I think the path is something that chooses us oftentimes. And I think that's a common thread among many people who do traditional healing work. But for me, it was really an example I saw through my family first, through mostly the women in my family. So great-grandmothers, grandmothers, aunts, my mother, even neighbors in the family or near our family. It was something that was such a cultural thing to see the women take charge and create remedies in the home. Perhaps they never considered themselves a curandera because they weren't doing all aspects of curanderismo, but they were definitely what I would consider kitchen healers.

And so at a very young age, that was something that I saw that I realized... It resonated very deeply with me. And so my first real, I guess, witnessing of curanderismo was with my great-grandmother, Delfinia. She was in Old Town Albuquerque in New Mexico. And she was the first person to really take me out wildcrafting. And I knew she made remedies for the people in the town and for the family member. So that's where I really started understanding that this was her occupation, where I think a lot of the other people, this was something they definitely did on the side. But she lived to be 94 and she was still massaging hands and working with herbs up until that time, till I remember.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That's an interesting kind of distinction of kitchen healing, just being an everyday part of life. And then this kind of deeper, more focused calling of a curandera. You mentioned in your book, which we're going to talk about later, that you have spent 28 years on this path of becoming a curandera, and then you are named in ceremony for that. And I thought that was interesting because often in the herbal world, there's that question of who gets to call themselves an herbalist? And how do we make those distinctions? And I never like to be like, oh, you have to be this qualified in order to be an herbalist. But it is important to, as you say in the book, not dilute the work that goes into this calling. And so I'm wondering, at what point did you feel that deeper calling to make this more intentional path?

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Well, I think I set out on... The path really opened up for me in my very early twenties. So like 21, 22, 23. I want to jump back just a moment. So with curanderas, or curanderos if it's a man, it's not that they're only doing herbalism. And I think that's why in some, not every community initiates their healers, but ones that recognize their healers as a curandera, that's when we're allowed to actually call ourself one. So anyone can still say, oh, I'm an herbalist. Or I work doing other things that are what we would consider holistic medicine. It's just that in curanderismo I would say it's more of a spiritual lifestyle, a wellness lifestyle. It's everything. So herbalism is just one facet of the practice.

And so for me at an early age, that's when I... You mean early and I look back now, yeah, 28 years ago. That's when I started training in massage, taking herbal classes, going to aromatherapy classes, but then also apprenticing under the indigenous grandmothers and the Mexican grandmothers in our community. And that's where I think that I just want to make that distinction because some of those women may have been known in the community as an herbalist, but they then would not consider themselves even a curandera. Usually the community that recognizes them, they tend to do more than just one thing.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Well thank you for sharing that distinction. And so as you're kind of coming along your path, how did that evolve or what were those moments of making that intentional step of knowing this was your path in life?

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

I think I just knew early on. In my twenties when I started massage school, at that point, I had already recognized that there was energy that I felt with people being around people, whether it was positive or negative energy or spaces. I was really developing a relationship with the plants. Certain plants definitely called to me more than others.

And then, in so many interviews, some people have asked me how did you go from being a chef to a curandera? They just think that's so funny. I'm like, well actually I started out as a curandera, then I actually went into culinary more deeply. And when I had my restaurant for many years, I think the people that came in often knew that I was up to something in the kitchen because it was very much like a kitchen healer little kitchen. I mean it felt like it for sure. And so when I closed the restaurant back during the great recession, I just kind of jumped full in to the healing aspect. And so by this time they were able to marry and it felt so natural to blend the kitchen healing aspect to our folk herbalism, because that's what I grew up with.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That's a great segue into something I wanted to ask you about. In the book you talk about imagining what your grandmother Lupita might have cooked for your father when he was young and how that imagining is important ancestral work for you now. So I'd love to hear more about that.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Sure. So my grandmother Lupita was my father's mother and she passed away when he was only nine years old. And she was a nurse and she worked with the tuberculosis ward in Las Vegas, New Mexico. And so from all of the stories I have heard about her, because it was a big family, all of the people have just amazing things to say about my grandmother Lupita. That she used to have these rafters in the old home and that herbs would be hanging down from there. They had a garden, not in their yard, but on her uncle's property where they grew a whole bunch of medicinal plants.

And so I just would sit there and imagine. My dad would be telling us these stories that he could remember as a little boy. And I just always imagined, what was that like? What did she cook back then? And when I'm cooking now, I like to invoke her essence sometimes because I didn't get to meet her. And so when I found out through one of her daughters, one of my aunties, that she used to use osha root, bear root with the TB patients. Oh, it just brought that herb to life more for me knowing that that was one of her I think all time favorite remedies and something she would carry around with her.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah. It's a wonderful way to invoke that deeper meaning behind the plants and strengthen our connections there. I'm excited to talk about rosemary. And my first question for you is how did you choose rosemary for our conversation today?

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Well, I started thinking, I think the day I got your email about the podcast today or the interview today, it was really windy that day. And I remember going for a bike ride and I did not wear a hat. I had a hat, but not one that covered my ears. And it was so painful. And it was like a little signal for me to remember what I had written in the book about the air. And I was like, that's what I'm going to talk about. I'm going to talk about rosemary because in the book I talk about all of the four elements. And with air in my culture, we do call when the wind is really cold and it gets in your ears, or maybe you're not snuggly and warm, your joints are cold, your muscles are cold. We believe that it can really cause headaches and things like that.

So it was that little bike ride with the cold wind that day that made me think that's what I wanted to share with you. The scent alone is one of my absolute favorites. And my first herbal teacher, she told me to this day, because we're still friends. She said, "Every time I smell rosemary, I think of you," because it's something that I just love growing in pots, in the ground. When I do my energetic cleansings, which we call limpias, which is like a sweeping of herbs on the body to... I'm using quotes, like to "smudge", but not with smoke, but with fresh plants. Oftentimes the curanderas, we use rosemary. Even though it's not an indigenous herb, it's something that the colonizers brought that we saw value in, in its medicine as a very potent plant. And so that's why I chose that. It was like there were so many things about it. Yeah.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Does it grow well where you live? Can you get pretty big bushes?

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

So well, yes. Where I live, I'm in Phoenix, Arizona. And just a little history. When the missionaries arrived, they brought with them citrus, pomegranate trees, olive trees, think of everything that would be in the Mediterranean, they brought to Arizona and parts of California. So all of those things grow well here. And so rosemary, I mean, you plant it in the ground and you will just have a massive, massive bush shrub.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I'm quite envious because where I live, we can't quite do that. So I plant it every year. Like I buy a gallon pot and I plant it outside. Because I want to be around rosemary for the seasons. And I love the smell of fresh rosemary and having fresh rosemary in the kitchen. Yes. But it doesn't last the winter here. And I have tried to overwinter inside and I have yet to be successful. So I kind of gave up on that a couple years ago, but whenever I'm around rosemary hedges or big bushes, and especially when it's in flower and the bees are so into it, it's just such a special gift.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Yes. I agree. Sometimes the people here in Phoenix, we'll have so much rosemary that we'll just be cutting it to trim it down and we'll just be giving it to people. Please take it. It's overgrown.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

How wonderful. Well, you mentioned limpias. What are some other ways that you like to work with rosemary?

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

I love putting it in a bathtub. I am currently in a town home. I moved last year and where I live doesn't have a bathtub. We just have two showers. And I didn't realize how much I missed the warm bath with rosemary. I've been getting the branches and hanging it in the shower just to at least release the scent. I love infusing it and making a tea with a little bit of honey. It's very strong as you know, but I just love it. I love cooking with it. I love using it in all ways, preferably fresh versus dried.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Let's talk about your recipe, because that's one way that you like to work with rosemary. It's rosemary tonic for cold air. What can you share about this recipe for us?

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

So in the book I talk about air like I mentioned earlier, that when in my culture, when we are around cold air, it's the idea that it can affect our body and make us cold, bringing on different ailments.

And so traditionally, traditionally meaning one or two generations ago, the grandmothers would primarily make this tonic in rubbing alcohol. That's not my favorite way to work with it, but I wanted to honor them by saying that's what would be traditionally used. But I say to use a bottom-shelf vodka or any other type of alcohol an herbalist would like to use. Probably something that was clear, I would say more so. But you'd really just get as much fresh rosemary as possible and mince it, chop it up just roughly in, I usually get about a cup to a cup and a half. Sometimes depending on the jar, I might just fill it all up. There could be four cups of rosemary because again, where I live, it's so abundant. And I just top it off with the vodka. And put it aside for about a month.

It depends too, when I'm doing it, because here in the summertime, it's really warm. So it might be done much sooner than in other places. But we use that tonic. I almost think of it like this sounds really dramatic. I have a dramatic family, but I remember my grandmothers using smelling salts and things like that when someone was feeling weepy. They would bring out smelling salts. And I do remember the rosemary being like, oh, this person seems kind of like they're going to faint. And they would splash on rosemary water or the tonic. It is drying. So it's not like something you want to put on your entire body, but it's something that definitely brings warmth to the joints. It's very traditional, but again, it's easy kitchen medicine.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I'm so glad you're sharing this recipe with us and this method because I think that rosemary is often dismissed as a culinary herb by people who might not be herbalists or know the deeper gifts there. But then it's often celebrated for its ability for memory revival or helping enhance memory, which is of course an important aspect of it. But I think it's really underrated for cold muscles, sore muscles. And this is a wonderful way. It's like liniment to get things moving and reduce pain.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Yes, I think of it. That's why I said this was a tonic because that's what I think of. I think of it as energizing and something that's very moving. And you get this medicinal brown, green liquid, and it does feel really just old. It smells very medicinal. You do, it has the rosemary scent, but it's very much a tonic.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Well, thank you so much for sharing this recipe for us and for the listeners. If you'd like to download your free recipe card, then you can visit the show notes at herbswithroseleepodcast.com. Was there anything else you'd like to share about rosemary today?

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

I would. I love sharing that in my practice. I do a lot of ancestral work with my clients. And one thing that I, you said it already, like it doesn't get as much recognition, rosemary. And I always remind people that are of Mediterranean descent, whatever that looks like. Maybe they're Italian or Spanish, Greek, wherever that the area where rosemary grows so well. I always tell them that if you're trying to do ancestral work, tap into those grandmother's energy and be creative in your thinking. How do you think that they worked with them? Perhaps they put it in shortbread cookies. Maybe they made a tea. Perhaps they tucked it into a sachet because when you're... It is an herb of remembrance. And I really think it's important that when you're doing that genealogy and you're doing that spiritual work, connecting with your ancestors, that if your ancestors used that herb, to bring it into your day to day. Don't save it for later. Try to use it every single day.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I love that reminder. My mother's family, I have deep ancestral roots that come from Southern France, which is a place that rosemary loves to thrive in. And I just, as you were speaking, it made me think about just being a little bit more intentional when I use rosemary, using it more often. And I like that idea of imagining and perhaps looking for some Southern France cooking recipes. And yeah, I love that, bringing that much more depth and connection and working with the plants. So thank you for that reminder.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Yes. I mean, they always say, everyone always says your energy is the most important ingredient in everything you do. So if you're able to bring in the energy of your grandmothers, then how amazing will that little potion be, even more so when you're preparing it.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah. Yeah. I'm excited to work with rosemary in that it's never like the first time, but it's like the deeper and deeper layers. So I just feel this kind of renewed sense of oh, that next layer of intention and deepening. So thank you for sharing that.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Of course, of course.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Well, I'm really excited to talk about your new book, Earth Medicines, Ancestral Wisdom, Healing Recipes, and Wellness Rituals From a Curandera. So this book, I immediately fell in love with it. This came out fairly recently and I got it right away. And it's so beautiful. It's inspiring. And I love how practical it is as well. And my first question for you about it is how these three themes came together for you in creating, just even having the idea for, the book and getting started?

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

How did the three...?

Rosalee de la Forêt:

The themes of ancestral wisdom and healing recipes and rituals as well?

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

So, I've been seeing clients now for so many years. Even when I had my restaurant, I was still seeing people on the weekends and things like that. It just, it was a natural evolution to when people come to see me now, they're perhaps coming to get the limpia, to get the energetic cleansing. And they laugh because they say I wasn't expecting to leave with recipes. And I think it's because it's just part of me. It's so deep, deep inside of me to want to cook for people and nurture people.

And so that's why with the book, people have asked me, is the book an herbal book? Is it a lifestyle book? Is it a cookbook? And I said, "It's actually, it's all of those things." It's I wanted people to be able to playfully work with all of the elements. And so, as an example, sun-dried tomatoes. I talk about how to sun-dry tomatoes properly without using a dehydrator. And yet in the same chapter, there's maybe a recipe for an herbal preparation for your skin. So it all makes sense when you look at the book and how it was broken down, but it's a reflection of me, to be honest.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

It feels like that. It feels like this kind of invitation to experience some of your world. And I want to mention that the book is broken up into the four different elements. And I really like the prayers that you have for each element and then descriptions more of the elements. And then each chapter has its own sense, obviously, because it's these different elements. But like you said, the recipes are kind of... I don't want to say they're all over the place. Like you said, it could be like, they seem very different, but in that context, it really feels like this container for each element.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Thank you. I think so far the book is being well reviewed with everyone. Same kind of the same thing. They're like, it's very different. This is such a different book, but it makes sense once they start going through it. I think that what I wanted was for people to feel like they were getting a glimpse of how I just operate on my day to day. It starts and ends with ritual and everything in between. I really, I was taught to do everything with intention. And so for me, let's say with the example of the sun-dried tomatoes, it's a food preparation and it's a way of preserving something so precious. For me, that's an ancestral food, tomatoes. And yet we don't really think about those things. We are harnessing the sun's energy. And so, that is in the fire chapter because that goes with the sun.

So it's really helping people peel the layers away to really see that if you want to be an herbalist, if you want to work and be your own medicine, you first have to go down to the bare bones of just understanding the elements, how they're ingrained in everything that we do.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That really does come to life with this book. Yeah.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Thank you.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I'm so grateful that you've written it and I know people are absolutely going to love it and just appreciate the depth of wisdom that's found in there as well.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Thank you. The photography, I was very fortunate because the photographer has been a friend and photographer of my professional work for over 15 years.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Oh, wow.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

And she lives about five minutes away from me. So when the book, when I was in the process of writing it, we really did work organically. And so everything wasn't shot in a weekend like so many books are. So we were able to travel and really get all the cracks and crevices of the Southwest, of all of the land that has raised me, as I mentioned in the book. So I think that me being such a visual person, the pictures also really helped tell my story as well.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah, you are so right because the photography is stunning. And it now feels like it just makes sense that this was your friend who has so much knowledge of your work, because it does. There's something about, it's not just like an image on paper. The book really comes to life with these images. I'm also a highly visual person. So I really notice the quality of those images and yeah, and just the interesting and unique ways you captured the recipes as well as the desert.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Great. Thank you. Which recipe really resonated with you?

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Well, I was just looking at the earth recipes this morning, and there was some... The facial recipe where it was like a facial clay. I can't remember the title of it.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Oh, tepezcohuite.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That's probably why I don't remember the title of it. And I love the richness and simplicity of recognizing, of putting earth on our bodies as ritual and as healing. So it was lovely to sit with that this morning. I'm excited to make that.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Oh, good. Sorry. I didn't mean to turn the interview back to you.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Oh, no. It was a good question. There are so many recipes in this book that people are going to find, so many things that they can really enjoy and bring into their lives and with intention.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Yes, yes. All of those little special rituals and everything. And I'm glad that you enjoyed the prayers as well. I was actually, when I was creating the book, I didn't know what to call those prayers. I didn't want this to feel like a religious book. And sometimes I felt like the word prayer can be synonymous with religion. But I stuck with prayer because it is such a big part of my day to day. And I really think it's also more of a gratitude, just having the gratitude for all of the elements.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah. I read all of them again this morning and I must have read the air one. For some reason that one jumped out at me this morning and I must have read it 10 times. It was just a powerful reminder of what wind is. And like you said, the gifts of wind. And I love the invocation of the

birds and all of that. So, yeah, it's just a paragraph maybe, but it was worth reading 10 times and letting it sink in deeper and deeper. So I really did appreciate those parts.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Oh, thank you. It really brings me joy to know that you loved my book and are still loving it. Yes.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Absolutely. Yeah. It's actually been on my coffee table and I've been sharing it with friends and we've had a good time looking through it. So yeah, it is a truly beautiful, beautiful work on so many different levels. Well, I'd love to hear what other projects you have going on in addition to your book.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Well, this project consumed two and a half years of my life.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

No doubt.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

So, it just came out and I feel like I'm taking a little bit of a breather because we are in, I call it the pandemonium. We are in this pandemonium. So I'm trying to regroup and figure out what I can do again once things are done virtually, because I am still teaching a lot virtually and presenting virtually. The project that I've been working on has been mostly with maternal wellness, for postpartum people. And so when my book went to the publisher and it was finally done, I spent the whole summer teaching, I think 24 postpartum classes on food ritual, indigenous medicine ways. And it was all for our Native American community here in Arizona, working with all of the different tribes. And that really, oh, it brought me a lot of, I don't even know if I have the word for it.

It brought me, it was contentment... It was satisfying, absolutely satisfying because these were a group of people that generally don't get that type of wellness work. There's a lot of emphasis on what to eat when you're pregnant and things like that, but not much to do after the baby and how you can help heal your body with different herbs and different kitchen medicine and things like that. So I think what's happening now is I'm starting to... It opened a door for me where I just already can sense that more projects are going to be coming my way because of that concentrated summer of working with postpartum moms.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

What an important offering to give to people. Sounds like really beautiful work. Well, the last question I have for you is one that I'm asking everybody in season three. And I wanted to ask this question because I think there's always more to learn about herbs. We never learn all there is. And there's always a freshness. I feel like just in this conversation with you, I have a freshness for rosemary that I'm excited to travel down that hole. So my question for you is what's something new that you are learning about herbs or something new you're trying with herbs, or just something new about plants and herbs in your life these days?

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Yeah. So I will say in my book, one thing that I really strived to do was to have a lot of crossover herbs for the recipes. Because most of the grandmothers that I learned from and formally herbal teachers would, a lot of them said the same thing. You should know five herbs very well and know how to use them in all different ways. And I feel like I've mastered that. And that's why the book, there's so many crossovers, let's say with chamomile or lavender, even with the different essential oils, like my basic five, that I feel like this newness I have now is now I'm very curious about learning about different herbs because I've spent almost my entire life studying the herbalism of the Southwest that I think that there's some type of little longing I have to want to even travel and see what some of the herbs are in different places.

And I'm putting it out there into the universe to see what opens for me, because if I'm this person here in the Southwest, studying my five herbs that I know back and front, right. Then there's someone just like me, me somewhere else and I want to go meet that person and do that in all different places. So it's just this desire to expand.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Oh, I love that. May it come to be, Felicia.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Thank you.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Well, thank you so much for being here today. I really appreciate you making time for our conversation, and I really appreciate you being here.

Felicia Cocotzin Ruiz:

Thank you, Rosalee. It was so nice to meet you. And I just want to say thank you for holding space for me and for your listeners. And thank you for always being just a shining light for everyone. We love your platform and we love learning from you as well.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Oh, thank you so much. It is absolutely my pleasure.

Thanks for being here. Don't forget to visit the show notes at herbswithRosaleepodcast.com to get free access to Felicia's rosemary tonic for cold air. Also available are the complete show notes, including the transcript. You can also visit Felicia directly on Instagram with the handle [@kitchencurandera](https://www.instagram.com/kitchencurandera) and at her website, kitchencurandera.com.

If you enjoyed this interview, then before you go be sure to click the subscribe button so that you'll be the first to get new episodes, including interviews like this. I'd also love to hear your comments about this interview and this lovely aromatic plant. I deeply believe that this world needs more herbalists and plant-centered folks. And I'm so glad you're here as part of this herbal community. Have a beautiful day.