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Taste of Home: Migration, Food and Belonging in a Changing Vermont

Pablo Bose

Department of Geography, University of Vermont

Alisha Laramée

Vermont Migrant Education Network

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we look at the question of food and migration in the context of both rural and urban Vermont. In the case of the former, we focus on the situation of foreign-born migrant farm workers on dairy farms and orchards and their search for familiar flavors and ingredients. We examine in particular the food supply chains that bring desired foodstuffs to workers on isolated farms and the paradox of desiring and purchasing the tastes of Latin America and the Caribbean while living and working in the midst of apparent bounty. In the case of urban Vermont we focus on newly resettled refugees from diverse regions of Africa, Asia and Europe and examine the ways in which newcomers have attempted to adapt new ingredients to familiar recipes or recreated old dishes to maintain a connection to a distant homeland. For both rural and urban newcomers, we also examine the possibilities of growing familiar and foreign crops as well as learning local food preservation practices on community and personal plots. The paper is based primarily on qualitative research with several migrants and newcomers relating their own experience with the food and migration dynamic.



KEY FINDINGS

- Accessing familiar food is difficult for both migrant farm workers and refugees in Vermont, due to availability, cost, and reliance upon third party mediators to procure the desired goods
- Out of necessity, both groups of migrants have begun to adopt “American” eating habits and practices
- The extensive and extended food supply chains currently necessary in order to provide migrants with familiar foods complicates our understanding of “eating local”

Introduction

This paper presents the preliminary results of an ongoing study into the food practices, options, and challenges for newcomers in a changing Vermont. It is part of a broader project that examines the transnational cultural and economic practices of immigrants in new destinations, particularly focusing on the ways that linkages are forged and maintained between new homes and older homelands. Our especial interest is in the ways that food – as a carrier of tradition, nostalgia, and identity – connects people to place in both old ways and new.

The research we have conducted is primarily qualitative in nature, using multiple methods to investigate our key questions. In order to explore the daily lives and culinary practices of migrants we have conducted a series of ethnographic, semi-structured interviews with a number of migrant farm workers and officially resettled refugees, as well as with service providers who work with both populations. Another set of interviews focused on proprietors of so-called ‘ethnic’ grocery stores in the Old North

End, a Burlington neighborhood with one of the largest immigrant communities in the state. An important part of our research also involves conducting participant observation of food-related events and practices with representatives of both migrant populations. These include community celebrations held by various refugee groups, tamale and salsa making workshops put on by farm workers, a micro-entrepreneurship project that connects refugees, farming, and farmer’s markets, and the authors’ observations of food preparation, meals, and the kitchens of several of our informants.

The two groups we have focused on – farm workers and refugees – constitute the bulk of the immigrant inflow into Vermont over the past ten years. The refugees include groups from diverse regions including Bosnia, Vietnam, Somalia, Congo, Burma, Bhutan, and Iraq (VRRP 2011). The farm workers are mainly from Mexico, though many have worked previously in other parts of the US

and come to work primarily on dairy farms (VT Migrant Farmworker Solidarity Project 2011). For migrants from both of these populations there are significant challenges to their presence on the predominantly white, rural, and aging landscape of Vermont. Both are precarious in their own ways—due to unfamiliarity with language, lack of reliable transportation, and a lack of financial means, among other factors. There are also notable differences between these migrant populations, of course, most notably in terms of their legal status—while refugees enter the United States as recognized immigrants with federal financial support, many farm workers are undocumented and often live precarious lives, both social as well as economic. Nevertheless, both populations often have a shared experience of forced displacement in their migration story. They are also subject to similar patterns of racialization in their perception and reception amongst the broader Vermont population. As such their contexts and concerns are often substantially different from those of other migrant communities, such as the transnational elites that have so often been the focus of the study of migrant cultural practices.

Our ongoing research in many ways confirms the arguments put forth by much of the existing literature on food, migration and culture – especially regarding the strong ties between people, place, and taste. At the same time, our study has shed light on the unique contexts and contradictions for newcomers in Vermont with regard to their culinary habits and desires. In this paper, we discuss briefly the importance of food in creating a complex sense of ‘home’ for immigrant groups, list some of the challenges for such populations in Vermont in accessing or recreating familiar foods, and highlight some of the attempts to create alternative food supplies and spaces for and by migrants in the state. We focus in particular on two complex and sometimes contradictory dynamics with regard to the food supply chain for newcomers to Vermont: the question of access to familiar foods, and the contested nature of what “local” food means when speaking of migrants.

Food – as a carrier of tradition, nostalgia, and identity – connects people to place in both old ways and new.

Food, migration and culture

The connections between people and place are forged, maintained and contested through multiple cultural forms, including many food related practices (Counihan and Van Esterik 2008). This is particularly true when we think about migration within and across borders, and between and beyond continents in an age of globalization. Whether arriving in a traditional immigrant gateway, being a newcomer in an unfamiliar region, or dreaming of a distant or ancestral homeland from an overseas community, food and drink have often played a major role in maintaining social, cultural and kin ties to other places (Fernández-Armesto 2002) or even alleviating homesickness (Matt 2007). This complex, multifaceted relationship between food and migration has become a topic of increasing interest to scholars intrigued by the role that food has played within the acculturation process—highlighting, for example, tensions and struggles within communities and individuals as they negotiate hybrid identities (Ray 2004). Others have pointed to other tensions—many of them fruitful—in the food and migration dynamic, including a clash between syncretism and parochialism in the encounter between various migrant groups, available foodstuffs, and competing traditions (Kershen 2002, Diner 2001, Gabaccia 1998, Alibhai-Brown 2008). These processes are an important part of identity construction for communities both old and new and perform a crucial function in narrating stories about difference and familiarity to migrants and established populations alike.

Generations of migrants have flourished away from their ‘homelands’, often establishing distinct cultural identities and differences as expressed through art, music, language, religion, and food practices. Indeed, the hallmark of so-called ethnic enclaves—whether in downtown neighborhoods or the newer “ethnoburb” (Li 2009)—is a preponderance of ethnic cuisines, food carts, corner stores, supermarkets, street festivals, and restaurants (King 2004).

Through the creation of such spaces and culinary preferences, different émigré groups have forcefully asserted their sense of self and difference. At the same time, food has helped many migrants to forge and maintain a significant sense of attachment to particular places—whether old or new, currently lived in or recalled through nostalgia. As Ray argues, “Food is particularly potent as a place-making practice because it links the land to the hearth and the hearth to the heart through the mediation of produce...[that] is exactly why immigrants crave some of the distinctive products of their homeland, notwithstanding time or place” (Ray 2004).

Accessing familiar tastes

In an era of globalization, where we often expect our grocery stores and restaurants to carry ingredients and dishes from across the world, fulfilling the food desires of new migrants might seem straightforward. After all, we can find tomatoes from Mexico, bananas from Ecuador, saffron from Spain, or rice from India in our supermarket shelves—if there is one nearby, and we can afford the cost. For many of the newcomers who we interviewed, however, their adjustment to life in Vermont has meant adopting new cuisines and adapting new ingredients into their diet. A complaint that we heard on a regular basis is that familiar foodstuffs are simply not available. A farm worker from Mexico told us:

We are used to eating hot foods, mole, tamales, but here there are not those foods. The only things you have here similar to our food are certain kinds of cookies (FW 14)

A service provider who often delivers food to the workers as part of a small but growing side business echoed similar sentiments:

The things they're asking for are not sold on any farms around here and if they are they're really hard to find. I can get these certain products at a few stores but they're going to be more expensive. I feel bad



charging a lot of money (SP 8)

Yet another farm worker put it perhaps most bluntly:

We eat American food. There's no Mexican food here (FW 7)

When asked about their eating habits, many refugees reported a similar lack of access to familiar ingredients and foodstuffs. An Iraqi woman told us that she drives ninety minutes north to buy spices in Montreal. A service provider recounted attempts by seniors within the Vietnamese community to start a community garden just in order to be able to grow vegetables they cannot otherwise procure. Members of the Bhutanese Nepali-speaking community reported even more arduous journeys to secure coveted tastes. Family members and friends who are slated to arrive as part of the refugee resettlement program are often asked to bring along spices and other ingredients amidst their luggage.

Such ad-hoc solutions are of course neither desirable nor sustainable in the long run.

One might surmise that it is

the very newness of these particular immigrants in Vermont communities like Burlington or on the rural landscape that makes the foods they crave unfamiliar and unavailable. Perhaps given time, these foods would become more plentiful. And indeed it is true that the last few years have seen the emergence of a number of Vietnamese restaurants in Burlington. But what clientele are these eating establishments meant to serve? As Beriss and Sutton note, restaurants are often defining features of particular neighborhoods or even regions, yet can simultaneously serve as the site of conflicts over what constitutes cultural authenticity. They suggest that “while tourists may allow a restaurant to remain profitable, many city residents argue that, without significant local clientele, chefs, managers and owners will lose sight of their putative responsibility to reproduce local culinary culture” (Beriss and Sutton 2007).

In the case of Vermont and migrant

foods, the situation is somewhat more complicated – in a majority white state where the migrant communities are so small, no restaurant could survive without the patronage of the broader population. But, following Beriss and Sutton, what might it mean for ethnic cuisines to become a form of cultural tourism, of consuming the exotic and the unfamiliar? What might it mean for migrant populations to produce food not for themselves but primarily for others? Indeed, how might this dynamic affect our very understanding of what the term ‘local’ means?

Changing habits, changing tastes

Given the dearth of the foods they are familiar with, what options are newcomers to Vermont left with in terms of what to eat? In many ways, this is dependent upon where migrants live. Most of the farm workers are located in isolated areas where their very presence must be hidden due to their legal status. Many live and work, moreover, in counties that have been classified as rural food deserts (USDA 2011). They are often dependent, therefore, on intermediaries – farm managers, bosses, service providers, or native-born co-workers – to purchase their food. One farm worker told us despairingly:

We don't eat food from Vermont, nothing more than cheese (FW 6)

Yet the alternatives are few, as a service provider suggests:

Every once in a while the farm workers will say 'oh no we don't eat tortillas anymore.' Most do, that's really what they're looking for. They're frantic. They'll call at three in the morning, if they realizing they're getting low on tortillas. There are some farms that have moved to American food. They don't eat tortillas and if you know anything about Mexican culture that's pretty much the staple (SP 6)

The shift to “American food”, in lieu of alternatives, was a common theme amongst many of our interviewees. For refugees, almost all of whom are settled in the state's



largest urban area, there are a greater set of options, including supermarkets and an increasing number of newer ‘ethnically-oriented’ grocery stores. Yet even here we found evidence of change, in both tastes and food practices. In the kitchen of one of the refugees from Bhutan, we discovered boxes and boxes of breakfast cereal. When asked whether this was a preferred food, she told us that it was simply what was being given to them by the service providers. Since they were not used to drinking cold milk, this was not, in fact, a food they were accustomed to, but they felt it might appear ungrateful were they not to accept it. However, she also showed us one box that she had opened and was giving her two-year-old daughter to eat each morning – cold milk and breakfast cereal, so that her daughter would learn to “eat like an American” (R 14).

The changes in food practices often extend beyond ingredients to actual eating habits themselves. Another Bhutanese refugee told us that observing co-workers at his factory job during lunchtime had changed the way he eats:

In Bhutan we eat with our hands, not with utensils. But when I began my job and I saw how the others eat in the lunchroom, I did not want to stand out. So I started eating with utensils. Now I eat with a fork and spoon even at home, but my family does not (R 3)

Food preparation practices have also changed to extend beyond the traditional gender roles. In the case of farm workers, this is in part because there are no women on some farms:

Some guys are learning to cook but if there’s a woman on the farm you see that all revert back to Mexican style [of women as the primary food preparer] (SP2)

For some refugee families, the responsibilities for cooking have changed due to other demands, most notably the need for both men and women to often work outside of the home. As one Bhutanese woman commented, food preparation typically takes two to three hours, which she can do now because she

does not have a job (R 4). If and when she does procure employment, she sees the situation changing and told us that her husband will need to learn how to cook if her work schedule requires her to be away in the evenings.

In the face of such constraints, many migrants—both refugees and farm workers—have turned to what they consider a more ‘American’ approach: purchasing already prepared foods:

A lot of farms with men where their work schedule is really tough, they buy a lot more prepared food that my wife makes, like frozen plantains, already cooked that they can just throw in the microwave. (SP6)

There’s a lot of fast food that gets picked up if there is another herd manager or farm worker who is gonna go, depending on how far the place is from the farm. In some places I’ll see a lot of Chinese food containers, a lot of pizza, if they can get pizza delivered. In some places fast food looks like a regular lunch (SP 1)

The changes in food practices often extend beyond ingredients to actual eating habits themselves.

Developing alternative food spaces and practices

If food does indeed play such a pivotal role in the identity and self-perception of the migrant, what does it mean to suggest that an important part of resettlement is to lose one’s connection to certain ingredients and practices? Does acculturation demand an ‘Americanization’ of tastebuds to the detriment of other flavors? Our research suggests that though achieving familiar foodstuffs is not easy, migrants in Vermont and the service providers who work with them have attempted in various ways to acquire them. There are three particular initiatives that we highlight here:

Ethnic Grocery Stores

Recent years have seen a surge in the number of ‘ethnic’ grocery stores in the Old North End, catering primarily to the various refugee communities. They are located close to their clientele and stock a wide range of goods that appeal to the diversity

of populations nearby. One storeowner described his operation as a “multinational store” (SO 1), while another told us that in her business:

I have a little bit of everything to be like a corner store. Pasta, tomato sauce, umbrellas, fresh vegetables. It's a little neighborhood. It's not just an African store. Anyone in the neighborhood could stop by (SO 3)

Another storeowner told us that in addition to the local refugee communities, he provides supplies to the burgeoning new ethnic restaurants in the area (SO 2). Yet another described his store as akin to a community service:

My goal is to provide the kinds of food that one can easily get in Nepal but that will not grow here in this cold climate (SO 5)

New farmers and farmer's markets

Another initiative that aims to connect migrants with food—though not necessarily the foods that they might desire—is the New Farms for New Americans Project. This three-year-old program is run by the Association of Africans Living in Vermont and involves training refugees with farming experience from diverse backgrounds (NFNA 2011). Participants have included Bhutanese, Burmese, Burundi, Somali Bantu, Iraqi, and Congolese. There are three levels at which migrants may participate – as Community Gardeners, Social Enterprise/Incubator farmers, and Independent Beginning Farmers. Close to 100 refugee households currently participate in the program, producing food at three separate sites in and around Burlington, on roughly 10 acres of land in total. The mission of the program is to produce pesticide-free goods for local farmers markets, restaurants, grocers, and a CSA, using “sustainable and culturally appropriate practices.” In addition to a range of produce, the program also prepares specialty ethnic foods such as Nepali dumplings, East African samosas, Somali bean and vegetable soup, injera, and African hot sauce.

Farms Workers and Alternative Food Practices

Migrant farm workers cannot—for reasons we have elaborated above—have such visible and well-recognized spaces in which to develop and celebrate the foods that they might miss and desire. In their case, the attempts at accessing familiar foods have been more difficult and in many cases much more subtle. The most direct alternatives we have seen have been the development of small, mobile ‘tiendas’ (shops), which cater to farm workers specific culinary (and often cultural) needs. Some have been started by service providers, others by farm workers themselves, yet others by entrepreneurs in other states who know of a captive and eager market:

People live so far away from NYC but they'll call the food vendor and say come sell me food and the food vendor will ask where they are and say that's way too far. It's not worth my while and they'll say I'll pay you 100 dollars and then pay the high food prices on top of that (SP 3)

Less exploitative alternatives have included workshops held jointly by farmers and service providers to teach migrant workers how to preserve local, sometimes unfamiliar foods for the winter months. Since the growing season is year round where the workers come from the process of food preservation provides them with the opportunity to learn local traditions, as well. Finally, in one of the most promising initiatives we came across, a service provider has begun working with farmers and farm workers to allow small plots to be tilled and planted.

Some farms have allowed workers to set up little gardens. They've tilled land, gave some seeds. I know of two farms where they do that. The farm owner will leave a strip on the edge of their fields and they'll plant sweet corn for the workers. They'll have a strip of corn in the summer. I know a few farms where they raise chickens so they get their own eggs. Some of the farm owners will offer meat as a bonus—a non-cash benefit (SP 2)

In most cases, however, where we find migrants in Vermont growing food, it is not necessarily for themselves.

The challenge: Food supply, migrant desires and eating local

Such attempts at creating alternative food spaces to address the needs of newcomer populations in Vermont seem like a welcome and promising effort. And yet even in these initiatives we find contradictions and challenges that call into question some of the most cherished notions when it comes to food systems and sustainability, in the context of Vermont. The state has witnessed a tremendous growth in interest in organic foods, sustainability, and a connection to the working landscape. Above all perhaps, has been a commitment to the idea of ‘the local’ in the emergence of a Vermont food systems model. But what does this mean when we talk about migrants and their food needs and desires?

As we have highlighted previously, one of the most challenging issues for refugees and migrants is the ability to access familiar foods—because of availability, cost, transportation. If we think about the ethnic grocery stores that have emerged to serve the refugee populations in the Old North End, they are, in some important sense, ‘local’, in that they are often within walking distance for the nearby populations. Yet they remain often more expensive than the larger supermarkets, which are themselves located farther away, necessitating a bus or car ride by migrant. And perhaps more importantly, the food supply chain upon which the proprietors of ethnic grocery stores must rely, require long trips to major metropolitan cities. One owner told us:

I buy my specialty items in New York City. I drive there once a month to pick up my supplies, though last year I was driving there two and three times a month. Some of my supplies also come from Nepal, like the jimbu plant which grows above 10,000 feet (SO 1)

Another recounted a similar story:

Each week my father drives to Boston on Tuesdays to buy vegetables, while my mom, wife, brother and sister all take turns working in the store with me (SO 3)

Said yet another wistfully, describing the personal toll that maintaining this food supply had on her:

If I could bring Boston and New York City closer, it would be cool (SO 5)

The question of what constitutes ‘local food’ is therefore interesting when one considers the migrant’s perspective. For a refugee coming from Nepal, a local food may be a plant that only grows at 10,000 feet in the Himalayas. For a refugee from the Congo, a banana might be a local food—to them.

To a Mexican farm worker, packaged tortillas arriving from New York City or Boston might represent the local. Perhaps it is in the growing and cultivating of their own food that we might find the most promising examples of ‘local food’ opportunities for migrants in Vermont. Certainly the provision of land to the farm workers to grow crops for their own consumption is a good start. In most cases, however, where we find migrants in Vermont growing food, it is not necessarily for themselves, but rather for farmer’s markets (as in the case of the New Farms for New Americans program) or for migrants on many dairy farms in the state:

We don’t drink the milk from the farm. We only milk cows here. We buy all of our food, milk, vegetables, and fruit. We asked if it was okay to drink the milk and they told us no because there’s a lot of bacteria (FW 17)

The irony of such situations – having access to land for growing, as long as it is not for one’s own consumption, and spending days on end milking yet never drinking the milk itself – highlight the complexities and contradictions we have found in the course of our research. Migrant farm workers and refugees have shown us, through the challenges they face in accessing familiar foods and practices, that the notion of “eating local” itself may need to be reframed.



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Center for Rural Studies
206 Morrill Hall
University of Vermont
Burlington VT 05405

Tel: (802) 656-3021
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