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## THE ROLE OF FOOD AND CULINARY CUSTOMS IN THE HOMING PROCESS FOR SYRIAN MIGRANTS IN CALIFORNIA

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THE ROLE OF FOOD AND CULINARY CUSTOMS IN THE  
HOMING PROCESS FOR SYRIAN MIGRANTS IN CALIFORNIA

by

Sally Baho

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2020

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By

Sally Baho

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# The Role of Food and Culinary Customs in The Homing Process for Syrian Migrants in California

Abstract

By Sally Baho

University of the Pacific  
2020

This interdisciplinary thesis explores the foodways of six Syrian migrant families, both immigrants and refugees, in California and the role that culinary customs play in their homing process. The homing process is the dynamic way in which people create home according to their life circumstances: food, eating, and culinary customs after migration in this case. Home is not only the place where people live, but also, where they come from and how they feel comfortable; home is both a physical space and an abstract concept. Home, and the various definitions of home, are mapped out in this project because understanding these various meanings allows for a clear understanding of the homing process for migrants. To explore Syrian migrants' foodways in California, I conducted interviews with these six families, and, in analyzing the interviews, chose four salient culinary customs to demonstrate the role of foodways in the homing process. The four culinary customs are: the distinct morning coffee ritual; mealtimes and meal routines imposed by work or school; lunch as the day's main meal, which must be *tabekh* (cooked food); and the importance of handmade food. Taken together, the consistent patterns followed, and energy devoted towards food and culinary customs provide evidence that effort expended in maintaining customary foodways is effort in recreating home. This project adds to existing

scholarship on the relationship between foodways and migrant communities' identity maintenance in that it demonstrates a unique and particular devotion to the rhythm and ritual of foodways that allows Syrians to not only make a new home, but to also feel at home in a new land.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*“Home...[is] one of those words of multiple meanings: the perfunctory description accorded the building in which one currently resides, but also the warm, rounded name used to describe the place from which ultimate comfort and safety are derived” –Kate Morton, *The Clockmaker’s Daughter*, p. 380.*

What role do food and culinary customs play in home creation for Syrian migrants in California? Krishnendu Ray writes that “food enables insiders to distinguish between their own culture and that of others and, by extension, between the home and the world” (162). Thus, the choice of foods and mealtime routines from a person’s homeland are daily, tangible, and ephemeral expressions of that homeland. Paolo Boccagni uses the term “homing process” to describe “people’s evolving potential to attach a sense of home to their life circumstances” (23). In this thesis I explore the “homing process” of Syrian migrants, both refugees and immigrants alike, with respect to food. The homing process allows migrants to create “home” or a familiar environment despite their life circumstance of settling in a new country.

To explore the homing process of Syrian migrants in California, I interviewed six families and found four culinary customs common to all the families. These customs highlight the role that food and mealtime routines play in their homing process in California. The four customs are: the obligatory morning coffee ritual; mealtimes and meal routines imposed by work or school; lunch as the day’s main meal, which must be *tabekh* (home-cooked food); and the importance of handmade food. Syrians are not the only migrant group that maintain these culinary customs; it is *how* they maintain and perform them and what that means with respect to the homing process that I explore in this thesis. I argue that using food and culinary customs to maintain cultural identity is critical to Syrian immigrants and refugees alike, so much so that they

go to great lengths to acquire and prepare traditional foods and maintain food-related customs no matter how inconvenient and laborious it is for modern American life.

## **Home and Food**

Similar to its English counterpart, the word for “home” in Arabic is nuanced and has several connotations. The interviews I conducted for this thesis were done in Arabic, and the complex notion of home arose. Abdo from Family 2 said, “My wife doesn’t feel comfortable if she doesn’t make everything by hand at home.” He said this with pride and reverence acknowledging the labor and intent involved in, and consequently the importance of, home cooking. Home cooking is more nuanced than just the foods prepared at home. In this thesis home cooking refers to the food being prepared in the physical home by Syrian hands and the notion that “home-cooking [*sic*] is brimming with quality...some subjective relationship to culture, and a lot of messy emotions” (Ray 167). Home cooking, then, is the emotionally charged food prepared by the Syrian migrants in their new physical homes. According to Ray, home cooking “is the antidote to mass production,” it is priceless and incomparable because the producer knows who the consumer will be and pours personal meaning into the preparation of meals (167). My interviewees repeatedly stressed the importance of eating and feeding their families home-cooked food. They spoke of their homeland, the foods of home, and home-cooked meals as extremely important to their Syrian identity.

The physical aspects of “home” also have various meanings. For this project, the original homeland is Syria; all of my interviewees identify as Syrian.<sup>1</sup> The “new homeland” is the United

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<sup>1</sup> Syrian dishes vary slightly from region to region and when these discrepancies arose in interviews, I asked for clarification and I explain in the data chapter (chapter 4).

States, generally, and California, specifically. I refer to the “new homeland” throughout this thesis simply as California because all six families live in California and had no plans of leaving at the time of the interviews. I refer to the physical home, the space where a person lives, as home. Syrian migrants are tasked with creating a new place to live when they resettle, or resettled, in California. From home cooking to a new apartment in California, food and culinary customs play an important role in each connotation of home. Table 1 lists the various terms for “home” used in this thesis and their respective meanings.

Table 1: All terms of “home” as used in this thesis

<b>Term</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Original homeland	Syria
Host country or new homeland	United States, generally, and California, specifically
Home	The physical space where one lives; abode
Home cooking	Syrian dishes made by Syrian hands in the physical home
Culinary customs	Food-related routines used to maintain Syrian identity
Feeling at home	A sense of comfort and familiarity

Just as home has many meanings, foodways has a complex meaning. I use Polly Adema’s definition of “foodways” as a foundation for research and analysis. Adema explains that in addition to the foods that people eat, foodways encompasses everything associated with food: procuring, preparing, and consuming it and “[includes] especially attitudes, customs, traditions, and ritualistic protocol” (818). In other words, foodways refers to all aspects of food of a “familial, regional, cultural, or ethnic group,” in this case Syrians (818). My argument is that culinary customs, which fall under the larger umbrella term of foodways, serve as intentional

and daily acts in the homing process. I find in my small sample that regardless of the time spent in California, ranging from four months to thirty years, the culinary customs are consistent and deeply meaningful.

### **Migrants and Their Use of Food in the Homing Process**

Food choices are influenced by a variety of factors, from preference to habit, but scholars agree that culture is the foundation that underlies all food choices (Nestle, et al.; Cantarero, et al.; Wright, et al.; Valliantos & Raine; Beardsworth & Keil; Lupton; Rozin). People prefer to consume foods that are customary to their own culture in order to reinforce their sense of belonging (Cantarero, et al.). Consequently, how migrants eat after moving to a new country is meaningful and telling. When migrants settle in the United States, they are not given an instruction manual that defines breakfast, lunch, or dinner. They lack food-related knowledge possessed by natives, such as where to shop, store hours, holidays, traditions, and much more. They may glean from government assimilation programs or word of mouth that lunch in the US is typically cold and eaten at work, or that dinner is a cooked meal and the main meal of the day, but they do not need to subscribe to these meal routines. In fact, it is in the very act of *not* assimilating to these meal routines and ways of eating that Syrians assert their identity. To apply Satia-Abouta's theory on dietary acculturation amongst immigrants, they are resisting dietary acculturation by maintaining traditional culinary customs.

Resisting acculturation by means of food choice reflects cultural heritage and is significant as it provides an emotional attachment to "back home" (Hodges & Wiggins). It is no surprise then that the foods of a person's homeland are often called "comfort foods." It is those comfort foods that migrants seek when they are in a new country and faced with recreating the

physical home. So, what does this tell us about Syrian identity? I assert that seeking those ingredients and dishes, and the routines surrounding them, allow migrants to continue to feel Syrian. Further, it tells us what it means to feel “at home.” Feeling “at home” in the context of food and migrants is feeling safe, comfortable, and familiar in what and how migrants eat, one of the most basic elements of human existence. Natalia Fadlalla explains that “to feel comfortable in their new homes, refugees try to reconstruct or remake the concept of their original homes or reproduce certain qualities of it” (140). I focus on food and the rituals surrounding food as those certain qualities, adopting Fadlalla’s framework, that Syrian migrants reproduce as they navigate the homing process. The visceral act of eating allows migrants to recall their life in Syria and provides a way to recreate those memories or associations through food in California.

### **My Story and This Project**

I chose to study food for its deeply personal and densely packed meanings. I am Syrian-Californian and have a deep and personal interest in food. I have navigated the homing process via my family’s Syrian foods and culinary customs in California. There are numerous ways that migrants can maintain their culture in a new country, and there is a vast body of literature exploring those practices, from religion (Mazumdar & Mazumdar) to language maintenance (Bahrack, et al.; Luo & Wiseman). I have chosen food because there is so much symbolic meaning packed into food and culinary customs. As Arjun Appadurai states, food is “a highly condensed social fact” (494), and it is that social fact for Syrian migrants that I explore in this thesis.

I couple my personal experience with the academic literature and use qualitative research methods to explore the following questions: How do Syrians use culinary customs to maintain

their culture and identity as they create a new home in California? Are new Syrian refugees fundamentally similar to or different from voluntary Syrian migrants who have been in California longer in their maintenance of the foods they eat and the rituals and routines surrounding those foods? I explore select culinary customs of Syrian migrants by analyzing oral interviews that I conducted with six Syrian refugee and immigrant families in California.

I find myself uniquely situated to tell this story as I am a native Levantine Arabic speaker.<sup>2</sup> We moved from Aleppo, Syria, to Atlanta, Georgia, when I was six-months old, and permanently settled in California when I was four. For as long as I can remember we ate Syrian food: okra in tomato sauce with rice for dinner; *mhalabiya* (a warm milk pudding laced with orange blossom water), when our throats hurt; melted white cheese sandwiches, for there were only two types of cheeses in Syria; *zeit w za'atar* (olive oil and a thyme-herb blend) that you dip bread into, always the *zeit* (oil) first so it acts as a glue for the *za'atar* (thyme); and many other time-consuming dishes that my mother labored over, despite her full-time work schedule. As a child, I was never ashamed of my family's food. I was one of those kids whose cultural dignity carried through to adulthood. I was, and am, fiercely proud of my heritage. This is not to say that conversations about "the gross mush" in my lunch did not sting or make me upset, but I took it upon myself to be the cultural ambassador of Syria to Pacific Grove, America's self-proclaimed "last hometown" (Pacific Grove.) Over the years this manifested itself in many ways, like selling *baklava* (a sweet Mediterranean pastry made of phyllo dough, walnuts, and spices) at school bake sales. I thought my family's culinary customs were unique, but when I moved away to college and met more Syrians who shared the same intentional culinary customs,

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<sup>2</sup> Levantine Arabic is the dialect spoken in the Levant, the area of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan; I learned to speak English when I went to preschool at age three. I communicate with my family in Arabic.



I learned that I was not alone. I began to think that maybe this was a universal Syrian theme applicable to more than just my displaced family of four.

In 2011, a gruesome internal conflict began in Syria driving people out of their beloved country. Over five million Syrians have been displaced outside of the country and six million internally, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. People were, and are, being forced to make new homes in foreign countries. “What do they eat?” I asked myself. I saw in the popular media, such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, stories of Syrian refugees and the “exotic” foods they were recreating and sharing with the community (Rao; Cogan). Photos of women with beaming smiles, donning *hijabs* (the traditional Muslim head covering), holding *ma’amoul* (popular stuffed cookies baked in molds), were rampant on social media. I read about refugee-run pop-up dinners being held in Toronto, where refugees were invited to cook for the community, and I began to feel like there was a bigger story (Whittaker). Could the adamantly proud food culture be a trait especially expressed in migrants—both refugees and immigrants? And so, this research project was born. I went out asking my fellow Syrian-Californians about their foodways. What do you eat? Where do you shop? What do you buy? What dishes do you prepare? Why? I left the questions open-ended to allow the migrants to tell their stories. The results were consistent across all interviews: we love our food. Regardless of regional nuances in dishes, immigrant or refugee status, or how long we have been in California, food and culinary customs play a defining role in reasserting our Syrian identity as part of the homing process.

Food and customs surrounding food is highly protocolled in Syrian culture. Further, there are superstitions and emotions that are deeply associated with every aspect of eating, from preparing to sharing meals. One important aspect of Syrian culinary customs is the notion of

*nafas*, an Arabic word and concept. The direct translation of *nafas* is breath in Arabic. It is quite literally considered both the love and energy you put into making the food for the individual or family member(s) that makes it taste good. When the interviewees talked about Syrian ladies being *m'atayeen*, “taking their time to make a dish,” they were talking about this very concept of *nafas*. In Syrian culture some people with bitter personalities are said to not make good tasting food because they do not have *nafas*. On the other hand, some people care deeply about making food that they can make the same dish as another person, but have it taste better because their *nafas* is in it. Syrians who cook for family members or guests do more than simply prepare a meal, they are putting their love and *nafas* into the food. It serves, in many ways, as a thread or breath back to Syria and demonstrates the importance of handmade food and feeding loved ones.

In Syrian lore, sharing food with another person creates a bond between the two parties. Food is so important in Syrian culture that betrayal after sharing a meal or “breaking bread” with someone is almost unforgivable. There is a common Arabic proverb, *fi baynatna khibz wa milh* that directly translates to “there is bread and salt between us.” Both bread and salt are very important in Syrian culture and symbolic in the Arabic language because it is understood that both are fundamental staples to meals and cooking. Once people have shared a meal together, they are bonded. If someone betrays another or lets them down, the betrayed often says, *ma nseet el khibz wa milh yelli baynatna?*, which translates to, “have you forgotten the bread and salt that is between us?” If sharing food between strangers creates a bond, imagine the importance of the daily meals taken together in a family. When the interviewees fed me, they were not only showing their hospitality and honoring me in their home, they were also creating a bond with me. Ultimately, food and sharing meals is very important to Syrians. In this thesis I

explore what those foods are and how meals are shared; in other words, what it means to make and share Syrian food after migration.

I begin this thesis with a literature review (chapter 2), which situates the project in the literature and scholarship on foodways and the homing process in migrant communities. In chapter 3, I introduce the six families that I interviewed and define the four culinary customs. In my analysis and discussion, chapter 4, I take a deeper look at each of those four customs and what they mean with respect to the homing process for Syrians in California. Chapter 5 provides concluding insights along with areas for further research.

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

*“Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are.”* –Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

In this chapter, I present the literature that framed my analysis of Syrian food and culinary customs, and their role in the homing process for Syrian migrants in California. For this interdisciplinary thesis, I build on literature from anthropology, sociology, and food studies. I have two overarching themes for this chapter: “food and culinary customs” and “the homing process for migrants.” I further divide each theme into two subthemes: “cultural identity” and “memory” for the former, and “the homing process” and “eating in a new land” for the latter. For the first subsection, “food and culinary customs,” I explore both “cultural identity” and “memory” through the lens of culinary customs. This includes the importance of food and identity, culture, and food as embodied practice. For the second subsection, “the homing process for migrants,” I present the literature that I used to theoretically frame the home recreation process for migrants as well as the role of foodways in that process. To conclude this chapter, I address the research relevance of this project.

### Food and Culinary Customs

Food and culinary customs fit under the larger concept, foodways, common in the anthropology and sociology scholarship. Foodways are more than simply food itself, but also everything involved with and surrounding food, from finding to buying food and from preparing to consuming it. Further, foodways “refers to tangible and intangible...forces that shape how people share and serve food, including especially attitudes, customs, traditions, and ritualistic protocol” (Adema, 818). All of these components of foodways are visceral and evoke the senses and it is those components, because of their symbolic nature, that I am interested in exploring in

this thesis. “Eating is a critical mediating practice through which notions of sameness and otherness are produced, agency is expressed, and bio-authority is bestowed” (Abbots 58). By eating the “same foods” and not eating “other foods,” Syrians assert their Syrian identity.

**Cultural identity.** The foods a person chooses to eat not only play an important role in expressing their cultural identity but are also visible markers of belonging to an ethnic group (Chapman and Beagan). Foodways include what people choose to buy, the markets where they shop, the mealtime routines and what meals are prepared for those meals. Food Studies scholar Krishnendu Ray writes that the “local and provincial...penetrates the global (America) and reconstitute the latter” (6). When Syrian immigrants choose to shop at Middle Eastern markets and buy specific produce and spices in order to intentionally prepare and consume Syrian meals, they are reconstituting the United States with a local and provincial characteristic, Syrian, in this case. They are participating in changing or reconstituting, as Ray puts it, the United States. It is not globalization in the economic and international trade sense of the concept, rather bringing Syrian culture to American land.

When identity is challenged by physical relocation, people often turn to foodways to maintain their cultural identity because food is central to the human identity (Fischler). The interviewees I spoke with talked about their food as part of their identity, Abdo (Family 2) even said that “Syrian food *is* us” [original emphasis]. Since identity is challenged by physical relocation, it is only natural for migrants to create and consume the foods that make them feel like themselves. Marta Rabikowska, an independent scholar who has explored the ritualization of food, home, and national identity among Polish migrants in London, writes, “Food making and food consumption projects [*sic*] the concept of home, understood as a state of normalcy to be regained in face of the destabilized conditions of life after immigration” (4). For the Syrian

refugees I studied, moving to California was not their choice. They were forced to leave due to civil unrest in Syria, but what, how, and when they eat are voluntary choices. Those choices project a desire to return to a state of normalcy, in other words, home.

Psyche Williams-Forsen, an African American food studies scholar, presents the case of Ghanaian immigrants and how they navigate “cultural sustainability” through their foodways in the United States. Her work “I Haven’t Eaten if I Don’t Have my Soup and Fufu” explores the gardening and shopping practices of Ghanaians and how these intentional behaviors “[inform] how food practices, customs, and habits can be maintained across borders” (83). Williams-Forsen found that Ghanaians yearn for certain flavors, tastes, and smells and seek them out, despite the effort required to do so. Comparably, the Syrian migrants I interviewed described the effort spent seeking out familiar ingredients that were fundamental to their meals and daily eating practices. The Syrian interviewees similarly describe their food choices and culinary customs as intentional daily practices in asserting their identity. Salma (Family 4) told me, “I don’t feel full if I don’t eat *khibz* (bread) with every meal.” *Khibz* is the word for “bread” in Arabic but in the context of Syrian Arabic it refers to flatbread. Other breads are differentiated by name, for example *sandweesh* refers to rolls for making sandwiches and *brioche* is the sweet French bread leftover from the French influence of colonialism. But it is *khibz*, Levantine flatbread, that is longed for and needed at every meal for satiety. Williams-Forsen’s work offers a similar finding and provides further support to my claim that certain immigrant groups make a concerted effort to recreate their foodways in order to preserve their cultural identity across borders or simply feel satisfied in their eating.

**Memory.** Eating is an embodied practice. Studying a person’s eating practices allows for consideration of both the bodily senses, the five senses, and other senses such as “learning,

memory, knowledge, ritual, and socialization” (Ignatow 419). Migrants use their senses, especially with respect to food preferences and eating, to guide them in a new place, maintain their identity, and recreate home. Anthropologist Emma-Jayne Abbotts explains, “The act of eating is an embodied experience and in migratory environments this visceral encounter with food informs food’s social role and cultural meaning” (53). This thesis deals with precisely that, Syrian migrants’ eating and culinary customs in order to inform their social role and cultural meaning.

Anthropologist David Sutton’s book *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Culture* provides an example of eating as embodiment; he explores the meaning of food and memory on the Greek island of Kalymnos. His work hinges on the premise that eating is embodied practice, and by examining the foodways of a people group, we can learn a great deal about group identity and culture. To a person unfamiliar with stuffed grape leaves, stuffed grape leaves may simply be grape leaves filled with rice, but for a person with a history of eating stuffed grape leaves, Sutton argues that they have synesthetic qualities. That is, when it is culturally elaborated, stuffed grape leaves act as essential components in ritual and everyday experiences; they participate in the creation and recreation of social bonds and divisions (Sutton). Although Sutton is not studying immigrants, rather Greeks in Greece, I apply his framework on the synesthetic qualities of food and the embodied practice of eating to Syrian immigrants in California.

### **Food and the Homing Process**

In a world characterized by the mass movement of people, what people choose to eat and how they eat are important aspects of their homemaking process. Further, after migration,

foodways fit somewhere on a spectrum that Jessie Satia-Abouta, professor of nutrition and epidemiology, termed “dietary acculturation.” The spectrum ranges from adopting the food practices of the new place, the “dietary acculturated” end, to tenaciously clinging to customary foodways, the “traditional” end of the spectrum. The Syrians I interviewed fall on the traditional end of the dietary acculturation spectrum with their insistence on maintaining familiar foods and culinary customs.

**Home recreation for migrants.** I blend two theories of “home recreation” from the literature for this project: the theory of home recreation for refugees with that for immigrants. I found this method to be the most logical as I analyze both immigrants and refugees in this thesis. Natalia Fadlalla, a conflict resolution scholar whose research focuses on refugees, writes, “Home is the physical manifestation of identity” (40). She claims that all refugees have one thing in common, and that is the loss of their original home. The same can be said for immigrants but due to the nature of their move being voluntary, it is considered less traumatic. The lost home of Syria plays a significant role in their identity. Fadlalla frames her conceptualization of home in four different dimensions: the material, the spatial, the emotional, and the imaginative, all of which have “everyday activities” in common. The everyday activities in this project are foodways.

For immigrants who voluntarily emigrated from Syria, I use the scholarship on transnationalism to frame my analysis of their home recreation. Sociologist Paolo Boccagni defines the process of home recreation for migrants as the “homing process,” which is “people’s evolving potential to attach a sense of home to their life circumstances” (23). For migrants, both refugees and immigrants alike, I explore the “homing process” of attaching a sense of “home” or familiarity to their life circumstances, those circumstances here I am defining as settling in a new



country and all that entails. The culinary customs I have chosen to explore in this thesis demonstrate this attaching a sense of home to their life circumstances. For example, making Arabic coffee to have first thing in the morning with a homemade Syrian sweet despite living in a crowded El Cajon apartment is making “home” in California.

**Eating in another land.** Immigration is the international movement of people; it disrupts continuity and physical space and creates stress (Ben-Sira). To counter, or cope with, this disruption and stress, people recreate home by choosing to prepare and consume the foods of their homeland (Almerico). Gwen Chapman and Brenda Beagan, Professors of Food, Nutrition, and Health, and Sociology, respectively, explore the foodways of Punjabi-Canadian families and how those practices “are implicated in their constructions of ‘who I am’ in the context of transnational communities” (368). They claim that “the foods that make up a person’s diet, the recipes used to prepare those foods, and the manners in which they are consumed are among the most visible symbols that someone belongs to a specific ethnic group” (367). My exploration of Syrian migrants’ foodways tells me who they are and who they choose to be in spite of the stress and disruption of migration.

Because food and foodways allow for continuity from the homeland in the new country, research suggests that both food and foodways take on a greater meaning for migrants than they would in the homeland (Gabaccia; Koc & Welsh; Scagliusi, et al.). As I explore the homing process, it is important to explore that elevated meaning of food and foodways for the migrant. Home “is no longer a closed familiar place, but rather a dialectic sphere open to crossroads, or a shifting terrain related to far-away memories, or an ahistorical moment that has both passed and not yet arrived” (Zhang 105). Recreating a home in California is open to crossroads. That is, there is the possibility for choosing from multiple paths forward: to acculturate or to maintain

traditional foodways. In the case of Syrian immigrants, the path chosen is familiar foodways and the “culinary home” is built from there. As Syrians navigate the stressful transition that is resettling in a new country, they turn to their familiar foods to find not only comfort, but also, home.

Ray’s book *The Migrant’s Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households* provides an excellent example of the relationship between immigrants’ foodways and their cultural identity in a new home. He explores the changing food habits of Bengali immigrants to the United States by asking, “What are the changes wrought by immigration in the deep structures of everyday life, especially in the realm of food practices?” (4). As a Bengali-American himself, Ray’s role as both an insider and an outsider allows him to reveal non-discursive knowledge about the unique situation of Bengali-Americans and tell the Bengali immigrant story to an American audience (10). I adopt a similar methodology, explained in the next chapter. As a Syrian-Californian myself, I interview Syrian immigrants about their foodways and tell the Syrian immigrant story to an American audience. Ray demonstrates how “food enables insiders to distinguish between their own culture and that of others and, by extension, between the home and the world” (162). He concludes that migrants pour “so much meaning into the rhythms of eating” (168). Meals serve as a reminder of the past in the present. Food in essence brings the past to life allowing for a recreation of home in the present. My findings corroborate his conclusion: the Syrians interviewed for the project give a great deal of meaning to their foodways allowing the foods of the past to become the foods of the present.

Maintaining traditional foodways is often difficult. The great lengths and expense Syrian immigrants go to in order to find and create traditional food is evidence of the importance of familiar foodways in their new lives. Scagliusi and her coauthors, all professors in the School of

Public Health at the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, explored the eating practices of seven Syrian refugees who have food-based enterprises in Sao Paulo. They found that, for their participants, “Syrian food was a native, meaningful and cherished category...which acted as this bridge in a recent and traumatic rupture and brought the feeling of being ‘at home’, since one characteristic of the ‘before’ – the eating practices – was maintained” (243). My findings corroborate theirs. Syrian food and culinary customs for migrants provide a sense of comfort and familiarity and make them feel “at home.” The Syrian participants in the Scagliusi study insisted upon buying the key components for Syrian dishes—cardamom, dates, pistachios—even if they were expensive. The immigrant families I interviewed recalled driving an hour or two out of the way to find an Arabic market when there was not one nearby. The refugee families found Arabic markets that took food stamps in order to buy the produce, spices, and *halal*<sup>3</sup> meat required to make familiar meals and abide by religiously prescribed eating laws.

Sociologist Robin Vandevoordt’s work with Syrians living in refugee camps in Belgium informed this project. Vandevoordt found that the foodways of Syrians in Belgium are “related to...a loss of their homeland as a whole and its unique tastes, scents and colours” (616). It is those tastes and scents, he argues, “that help create a specifically Syrian home that produces an ontologically secure microsphere in the here and now, whilst nourishing bonds with a life that was left behind” (616). Syrians in California seek certain tastes and scents, as my interviewees reported, and in those tastes and scents they create a familiar Syrian home. While the lost homeland of Syria cannot be replaced, the act of recreating and consuming Syrian foods allows Syrians to fill the void of the life that was left behind.

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<sup>3</sup> *Halal* means what is allowed by Islamic law. For meat, it refers to the butchering, including the prayers said, the method of slaughter, and blood drainage.

## **Research Relevance**

A number of researchers have explored foodways among immigrant and refugee communities: from Ghanaians in London (Tuomainen), Bhutanese in the United States (Kiptinness & Dharod), South Asian and Middle Easterners in Norway (Terragni, et al.), and Somali refugees in the United States (Dharod, et al.). The present conflict in Syria has resulted in one of the largest cases of forced migration of our time; however, little research has been done on Syrian refugees' foodways with respect to their home creation after resettlement. This study contributes to our specific understanding of the foodways of Syrian immigrants and also contributes to the literature on the importance of foodways in migrants' lives and their identity formation. While there are certainly changes in lifestyle and nuanced changes in ingredient availability, meal routine and choice of meal preparation are adamantly maintained. Building on Ray's notion that food is a place-making practice, this thesis demonstrates how foodways are a home making practice. Like Ray, I find myself as both insider and an outsider which allows me to interpret Syrian cultural norms to an American audience. I am using foodways to tell the story of Syrian refugees and immigrants as they recreate themselves and their identity via their foodways in their new home of California.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Studying culinary customs, especially within the scope of the homing process, allows for an intimate look into the lives of Syrian migrants. Because of the important, emotional, and quotidian role of food in people's lives, qualitative research methods were chosen to explore foodways and the homing process. Qualitative analysis deals with making sense of words and text and is "a process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (Corbin & Strauss 1). The language of the interviewees was analyzed using grounded theory, a methodology that allows for the interpretation of data about a phenomenon to develop theories about that phenomenon. Oral interviews were used as the data in this analysis to tell the foodways and homing process story for the six Syrian migrant families interviewed.

#### **Recruiting Syrian Refugees and Immigrants**

According to the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System, the United States admitted 20,844 Syrian refugees from 2011 to 2017, from the start of the war to the time when these interviews were conducted. California received 2,286 of those refugees, with the majority settling in San Diego (1,126) and Sacramento (438), making California the state with the most Syrian refugees (Worldwide Refugee). Although I had intended (and hoped) to interview a large number of refugees, it was difficult to find refugees who were willing to speak with me. After many cold calls to refugee assistance agencies in both Sacramento and San Diego, I was able to recruit one family with the help of a Baptist minister in San Diego. I connected with two other families through the first. The three refugee families I interviewed were all from Homs, Syria, and had immigrated within before the interviews. Each of the three families live in El Cajon,

California, about 20 miles east of San Diego. El Cajon has a large Middle Eastern population, specifically Iraqi, who have built a community there to include numerous grocery stores that not only sell Middle Eastern food supplies, but also cater to an Arabic-speaking demographic.

In order to explore food and culinary customs for both voluntary migrants and refugees, I expanded my study to include Syrians who had immigrated long before the war began in 2011. I interviewed my parents, who are both from Damascus and have been in this country for thirty years. I also interviewed two Syrian immigrant families to whom they referred me. All of the immigrant families live in Monterey, California. I chose three immigrant families to match the number of refugee families. The immigrant families have been in the United States from ten to thirty years.

### **Interview Protocol and Process**

I conducted six face-to-face interviews with a total of eleven participants. Most interviews included multiple members from each family although the *sit el bait* (lady of the house) assumed the role of main speaker. I directed the interview questions towards her because in Syrian culture the *sit el bait* (lady of the house) is traditionally responsible for food preparation. The *sit el bait* is the wife and/or mother in the traditional family. When the men participated in the interviews, they typically talked about the food procurement aspect of meal preparation as it is common for men to do the grocery shopping in Syrian culture. The men also commented on the behavior and food preparation customs of their wives such as preparing food on the weekends for the week or freezing dishes to later eat. Each family was different in their gender dynamics and roles and I will explore the families individually at greater length in the following chapter. The interviews took place in the participants' homes in El Cajon and

Monterey. They were conducted in Levantine Arabic, in both “Damascene” and “Homsian” dialects, with the exception of one interviewee who preferred to speak in English. I speak a Damascene dialect while the three refugee families, who are from Homs, speak a characteristically “Homsian” dialect; this did not pose a problem for communication.<sup>4</sup> Informed consent forms were provided to the participants in Arabic to sign prior to participating in the interview. The blank consent form can be found in Appendix A, along with the English translation.<sup>5</sup>

The interviews were semi-structured with a conversational tone. Jeff Miller and Jonathan Deutsch, contemporary food scholars, explain in their book *Food Studies: An Introduction to Research Methods*, “Conversations about food often contain informative digressions that will allow the researcher to discover additional information about the importance of the food phenomenon under investigation” (Miller & Deutsch 149). While I asked specific and standardized questions in all the interviews, I left space for the interviewees to tell stories and share relevant anecdotes that allowed me to paint a more complete picture of culinary customs in the homing process. The interview questions probed eating patterns and food acquisition, e.g., “tell me how you eat during the day?” and “where do you shop for your groceries?” They also provided open-ended prompts such as: “is the way you eat different here than it was in Syria?” The script for the interview can be found in Appendix B. Inclusion criteria required that the participants be Syrian refugees or immigrants over the age of eighteen. The interviews were

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<sup>4</sup> The questions were asked in “Damascene” and the interviewees responded in “Homsian.” This came up in the interviews with the refugee families. A few dishes have different meanings depending on the region. When that arose, I asked for clarification to ensure that I was understanding exactly what the interviewees intended to say.

<sup>5</sup> This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of the Pacific.

audio-recorded, and brief notes were taken during the interview. Subsequently, I translated and transcribed the audio files for analysis.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis, or studying people's words, allows the researcher "to get at the inner experience of participants" (Corbin & Strauss 12). Exploring foodways, culinary customs, and the homing process requires a deep and intimate analysis of people's lives, which is done by analyzing the interview participants' words. Miller and Deutsch explain the relevance of qualitative research when studying food "to try to understand the motivation, meaning, and context behind the actions, behaviors, and rituals of cultures, groups, and individuals" (137). In order to understand and explain the meaning of the Syrian foodways with respect to the homing process, I came up with four common culinary customs from the data: the obligatory morning coffee ritual; mealtimes and meal routines imposed by work or school; lunch as the day's main meal, which must be *tabekh* (home-cooked food); and the importance of handmade food. It is important to note that most of the culinary customs were addressed by all six of the families that I interviewed. I will explore these customs in greater detail in the next chapter.

### **Textual Analysis and Grounded Theory**

I incorporate textual analysis of the language that the Syrian migrants used to talk about their foodways to understand the role that food and culinary customs play in the homing process. The texts analyzed are the transcripts from the audio interviews. Text refers to any type of language that researchers can qualitatively interpret to understand the relationship between media and culture. Texts "provide traces of socially constructed reality, which may be understood by considering the words, concepts, ideas, themes and issues that reside in texts as



they are considered within a particular cultural context” (Brennan 204). In this case, I consider the words of the interviews within the very specific cultural context of food and its role in the homing process of Syrian migrants in California.

Using the texts from the interviews, I applied grounded theory methods to analyze my data. Grounded theory methods are systematic but flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing data in order to build theories from the data themselves (Charmaz 1). Grounded theory seeks to create theoretical statements based on empirical evidence (Glaser & Strauss 2). It is commonly used to analyze interview data. I allow the theory to inductively emerge from, or be grounded in, the data. By culling customs from the data, I am able to see what was important, both individually and collectively, in the interviews. I found this approach to be the most appropriate for my subject matter.

The Syrian migrants used common language and expressions to describe their foodways. I observed this among the six families that I interviewed as well as in the two studies that explored Syrian refugee foodways (Scagliusi, et al.; Vandervoort); I will explore this further in the next chapter. The inclusion of the immigrant interviewees, in addition to the refugee interviewees, strengthens my conclusion because it shows that despite having lived in this country for thirty years, Syrian immigrants maintain their foodways just as much as the newly settled Syrian refugees. The common culinary customs and what they mean with respect to Syrian identity and the homing process are presented in the following chapters.

## Chapter 4: Results

*Rose syrup. I make it by my own hands. If you have guests and your whole drawing room is full you have to have rose syrup to serve to them.* --Um-Samir (Family 3) [Original emphasis]

This project focuses on the homing process of Syrian migrants via foodways in California. In exploring this homing process, the interconnection of food and culinary customs to the various aspects of home, from the Syrian homeland to the “feeling of home,” are revealed. Further, my analysis shows that this interconnection is intentional and done with great effort and care. Syrian migrants impart their *nafas* (breath) in the food they cook to feed their families, and in doing so, maintain their “Syrianness” in California. I present a summary of the findings, followed by biographical information about each of the six families along with an overview of each interview. I close this chapter with an extended discussion of the key culinary customs and how they demonstrate the homing process for Syrian migrants. The four culinary customs are: the distinct morning coffee ritual; mealtimes and meal routines imposed by work or school; lunch as the day’s main meal, which must be *tabekh* (home-cooked food); and the importance of handmade food. At least one person from each of the six families addressed each of the four culinary customs in one way or another.

Regardless of the length of time that the interviewee had been away from Syria, from four months to thirty years, the examples that are presented in this chapter were cited as integral to home recreation and daily life. Fadlalla’s conceptual framework applies here as migrants “reconstruct or remake the concept of their original homes” as they resettle in a new place (140). The specific “concepts” presented are the culinary customs and how they are practiced, maintained, or adapted to allow migrants’ “Syrianness” to be expressed and retained, despite the

disruption of Syria as the homeland. Further, there is a great deal of emotion and protocol involved with food and feeding others, which I will also explore in this chapter.

### Participants

I first introduce the three refugee families. I briefly describe the family background, contextual information for each individual interview, and provide details and observations of the actual interviews. Next, I do the same for the three immigrant families. For the participants' privacy, all names used are pseudonyms; see Table 2 below. Five of the six interviews were conducted in Arabic; Jouheina (Family 6) preferred to do the interview in English but regularly used Arabic loanwords. She signed the consent form in Arabic.

Table 2: Participants

<i>Family</i>	<i>Members who participated in interview</i>	<i># living in household</i>	<i>Time in California at time of interview</i>	<i>Refugee or Immigrant</i>
1	Houda, Jameel, & Mona	6	7 months	Refugee
2	Maggie & Abdo	5	12 months	Refugee
3	Um-Samir, Abu-Samir, & Samir	6	4 months	Refugee
4	Salma & Michel	2	30 years	Immigrant
5	Jouheina	1	10 years	Immigrant
6	Elham & Ghais	2	26 years	Immigrant

**The refugee families.** I interviewed three very different refugee families. I knew they were different based on things they told me during the interview, such as: having lived in urban or rural areas in Syria, the mannerisms exhibited during the interviews, and the dialects/inflections used when they spoke. While all three were from Homs (region in Syria or

city) and spoke in a Homsian dialect; Families 1 and 2 spoke more formally than Family 3. This formality could be an indicator of many things: education level, socioeconomic status, being from an urban rather than rural area, or some combination of these factors. One characteristic I observed was the high level of background noise in the house during the interview with Family 3. During my interview with Family 3, the TV was on, phones rang incessantly, and Um-Samir even took a call during the interview. In the interview with Family 3 the participants continuously interrupted or spoke over one another. This was notable compared to Families 1 and 2, who did not have any background noise such as the TV and did not interrupt one another. The interview with Family 3 was the least formal. Um-Samir, the wife and mother of Family 3, fed me by hand during the interview by actually placing pieces of cut up fruit in my mouth with her bare hands, which is indicative of rural Syrian customs that tend to be less formal than urban practices.

I was referred to the first family by a Baptist minister who had worked with them at a fundraising event for Syrian refugees. Houda, the wife and mother of Family 1, referred me to the other two families; she had met them at English class at the IRC, the International Refugee Committee. She explained to me that part of the resettlement process included English classes at the IRC, which also served as a place to meet other refugees and make friends. The trait that these refugees had in common was their Syrian nationality but, based on comments made by Houda, she did not think they would have been friends back in Syria. However, she did not elaborate on why that was.

Each of the three refugee families lived in small apartments in El Cajon, a city in east San Diego County. Two of the three families told me that they had lived in larger homes in Syria. Abdo (Family 2) mentioned a large garden in their family's home in Syria where they grew

fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Um-Samir (Family 3) told me that her family had kept chickens on their land in Syria, which was their source of eggs. For Family 1, their displacement from Syria, and a tragic event that occurred in the process, resulted in a major change in economic status. While Houda shared the details of this event with me, she asked that I turn the recorder off during the interview and not include them in my research. Each of the three families had lived in another Middle Eastern country after leaving Syria and before arriving to El Cajon. In California, all of the Syrian refugee families shopped at Arabic markets in El Cajon, where they found the ingredients that they needed or substituted for standard items back home. Common substitutions that the interviewees mentioned were cow's milk dairy products (cheese, yogurt and milk) in place of goat's milk dairy products. As mentioned before, these markets cater specifically to a Middle Eastern demographic. Not only are the clerks Middle Eastern and speak Arabic, but in-store signs, such as product descriptions, sale indicators, and price tags, are also in Arabic. While the refugee families shopped for most of their food items at Arabic markets, two of the three refugee families specifically mentioned shopping at Costco for certain bulk or household items such as paper goods as it was more economical. Abdo (Family 2) even told me that Costco sold *halal* meat for a good price.

Moving to the United States constituted a major socioeconomic lifestyle change for each of the three families. At the time of the interviews, each of the three husbands were unemployed but had worked full time in Syria; none of the wives had worked outside of the home in Syria or are working in the U.S. They were currently living off government aid, personal savings, income from odd jobs, and family support. In the U.S., the three husbands gladly helped their wives with food acquisition, preparation, and clean up. It was either explicitly told to me or implied that, in their lives back in Syria food acquisition was the realm of men, because it was

done outside the home. Food preparation, on the other hand, the cooking, cleaning done inside the home, was done by women. As described to me, here in California the men did not do any of the actual cooking of the food, but instead participated in all other aspects of meal preparation including washing the produce, peeling the garlic, and picking the parsley.

The phrase *na'ee el ba'doonays* (picking the parsley) is a common example of both the labor involved in, and the preparation required for, Syrian dishes. *Tabouli* (a Levantine parsley salad) calls for finely minced parsley. In order to prepare the parsley for mincing you have to “pick it,” which involves washing the parsley and arranging each individual stem in the palm of the hand such that the leaves gather above the opening created by the thumb and index finger (imagine making a fist around the stems with the leaves coming out as if it were a bouquet of flowers). This is done with great care because *tabouli* calls for only the leaves and not the stems of the parsley as they would be disagreeable to chew and bitter. After the preparer has gathered a sufficient quantity of parsley leaves in their hand, they lay the bunch down on a flat surface and cut off all the stems with one cut. Then, holding the bunch of leaves with the other hand, they gently and delicately mince the leaves. The parsley leaves must be very finely chopped for *tabouli* and traditionally, this last step this was done with a mezzaluna rocking knife. Nowadays, however, people use a chef's knife or any big knife they are accustomed to. Abu-Samir (Family 3) said, “I'm not doing anything all day, I can help the woman out, it's a lot of work,” referring to hand prepared meals like *tabouli*. Houda (Family 1) talked about some health issues that currently prevented her from working extensively in the kitchen to her normal and full capacity. She praised her husband for helping, claiming that he worked “hand-in-hand” with her on everything food related.

*Family 1 – Houda, Jameel, & Mona.* I interviewed Houda primarily; her eldest daughter Mona (twenty-three) sat next to her during the interview and would occasionally chime in. Houda was a beaming, energetic young woman of forty-three and the mother of five children. Her eldest son lives in Malaysia while her other four children live with her and her husband in El Cajon. Many young men approaching the age of eighteen had fled Syria at the start of the conflict to avoid mandatory conscription in the Syrian Armed Forces. To respect their privacy, I did not ask if that had been the reason her eldest son was living in Malaysia. Houda's two younger children, a boy and a girl both under the age of ten, came in and out of the living room during the interview to watch. They did not participate, however. Towards the end of the interview, Houda's husband Jameel, who was around fifty-two years old, came home and shared some of his thoughts on the topic. He proudly told me about Syrian food and how long it took to make staple dishes saying, "you know how delicious they are." Jameel generally deferred to Houda on most topics, however.

Houda explained that her family had been quite well-to-do in Syria. She had never been grocery shopping other than to buy her children a "piece of gum or a bag of chips while out for a stroll in Syria." Her husband always did the shopping and when he went away for work, which he did regularly, he would stockpile her pantry. Here in California, she lets her husband do the "produce picking" but she likes to accompany him to the market and always monitors the sales. Houda explained over a big laugh "I don't even know how to pick the fruit or vegetables and when I do my husband tells me I'm doing it wrong." The art of picking produce and the hand preparation of that produce is an important aspect of food acquisition and preparation for Syrians, as demonstrated by the "picking the parsley" example above. This will be further discussed in Custom 4, "the importance of food being handmade." The importance of food

being visually appealing applies also to each individual piece of fruit or vegetable, whether it is going to be eaten alone or used in a dish. The Syrians interviewed told me that food preparation starts at picking the produce, paying careful attention to each individual food item. They explained that you want each individual piece of fruit or vegetable to be visually appealing because this will be reflected in the appearance and presentation of the finished dish.

When asked about her food practices in the United States as opposed to in Syria, Houda said that “everything here was different.” Back in Syria she did not work outside of the home and never got the day started without a *subheeyay* (morning coffee klatch). A *subheeyay* is a morning gathering, the word is derived from the word for morning, *subuh*. It is usually for women only where coffee and sweets are served. Houda went on, “But things are different here, we have to survive,” she said. She did not have the same friends and family network that she had in Syria but repeated how thankful she was to have four of her children and her husband with her. Houda told me they shopped “smart” to stretch their food stamps: she would wait for the newspapers to come in the mail and “follow the deals.” Houda prepared traditional Syrian food from Homs, *maqlouba* (a rice and eggplant dish), *lahme bl sayneeya* (“meat in a tray,” prepared the Homsian way with tahini and spices), stuffed grape leaves, *kebay* (Syrian meat pies), “everything,” she told me, “I make it all.”<sup>6</sup> She described herself as a very picky eater, expressing distrust of the meat in this country, and questioning if it were indeed *halal*. “I just assume it’s not and say a prayer over it as I cut into it when preparing it and rely on God that everything be OK,” she said.

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<sup>6</sup> They invited me to visit their home a second time and Jameel offered me *lahme bl sayneeya* (a dish which literally translates to “meat in a tray”) that Houda had made; Damascenes, like my family, do not prepare this dish. After leaving I called my mom and asked her why she had never made it for me. She said she didn’t know how to make it and had never had it herself.



Mona also expressed her dissatisfaction with, and fear of, the meats here as she had heard that they are “full of hormones.” She ate her mother’s cooking but was currently eating very little because she was upset by having gained two kilograms since arriving to the U.S. and was working very hard to shed them.

***Family 2 – Maggie & Abdo.*** Maggie and her husband Abdo participated in the second interview. I had been referred to them by Houda (Family 1). They were both in their mid-thirties and had three little boys, ages four, seven, and nine. Initially, Abdo was very suspicious of me and my intentions and would not sign the informed consent form or participate in the interview. He sat with his arms folded across his chest and listened to his wife answer my questions. Eventually his demeanor changed and he not only participated in the interview but also signed the consent form and brought me several Syrian sweets he had made himself.

Both Maggie and Abdo were adamant about preparing food at home and making sure their children did not want for anything. They were concerned about feeding their children homemade food and well-balanced, Syrian meals. They were very proud of their Syrian identity, cuisine, and the tradition of making food by hand. By preparing food by hand, they explained to me, the cook can inspect all the ingredients, ensuring freshness and cleanliness, as well as dedicating time to each individual item of food being prepared. These anecdotes from Family 2 again highlight the importance of hand-picking food, from produce shopping to dish preparation for Syrians. Many Syrian dishes are individually prepared, such as stuffed grape leaves or *kibbeh* (meat pies). Abdo explained:

With respect to Syrian food, whether it’s food for sale or for home, it is clean. A Syrian cannot make something she or he does not trust. For example, if my wife

cooks a dish, whether it's for us or for others, if she herself cannot eat the *samnay* (ghee) used to make it, she will not let me get it. So, we feel secure that our food is clean and tasty. [Author's translation]

Abdo was very frustrated by his lack of English language skills. He really wanted to participate in the economy and even dreamed of having a Syrian restaurant in El Cajon but felt paralyzed by his inability to communicate in English. Both he and Maggie were very afraid of “the system” in the United States. In Arabic, people use the phrase “*al-sistem*” to refer to customary protocol or policies in a culture or society. In this case, they were referring to the laws and policies for licensing, taxes, and other government regulations surrounding business ownership. They felt helpless because of their inability to read, write, and speak the English language. Of note, while Abdo and Maggie both did go to English classes, as required by the government-assistance programs, they complained that English was difficult to learn at their age. Since their classmates and friends in the area were also majority Syrian, they were not motivated to practice the English language on a regular basis.

***Family 3 – Um-Samir, Abu-Samir, & Samir.*** Houda (Family 1) also introduced me to her friend Um-Samir (mother of Samir). I was greeted by Um-Samir herself; her husband Abu-Samir (father of Samir); Samir; their two younger daughters, Sara and Soraya; and their younger son, Jad. In Arabic, parents are called *um/abu—*, “mother/father of—” followed by the name of their eldest son. The oldest son of a family is even called *abu—*, “father of—” followed by the name of his father even before he has children because it is customary for the eldest son to name his first-born son after his father.

As I walked up the stairs to their apartment, I spotted a round tray of red peppers left to dry in the sun and pulled out my phone to snap a photo. “May I?” I asked in Arabic. “You can do whatever you want, this is your home,” Um-Samir replied to me. Once inside, Sara prepared a hookah and Soraya boiled a *dallah* (stovetop coffee pot) of coffee. We sat around the coffee table with the hookah placed on top and passed the hookah pipe around as I conducted my interview. Um-Samir told me that she made everything by hand in Syria. She told me how she would get hundreds of kilograms of pomegranates in the fall when they were in season and make *dibs riman* (pomegranate molasses), a common element in Syrian cuisine. In Syria, she liked everything natural that came from the earth and her days completely revolved around food acquisition and preparation. She shared the following story:

One time, Abu-Samir took me to the place where they sell the vegetables and we bought a sack this big and this high [seated, she gestured her arms as if she were giving someone a hug and then raised her right hand to about her shoulders, indicating the height of the sack] of carrots. I brought them home and from the morning soaked them until the afternoon, then I cleaned them and using my juicer, I made carrot juice to feed my family. I spent 4,500 liras [about 100 USD] on that juicer and I loved it. I don’t have one here now, so I make the juices by hand but for me I love juices and I make them for my family. [Author’s translation]

Um-Samir had only been in California for four months, so she had less experience than the other families on food acquisition in this country but told me that she only shopped at the Middle Eastern markets and looked for items that were on sale. She did not care to try any new foods and continued to make the same dishes she had made in Syria. By the end of the interview, she was handfeeding me fruit and bringing me her preserves to taste. After the extensive interview and discussion about how time-consuming Syrian foods were to prepare, it was very special that she would share her precious creations with me. I felt very welcome in

their house and was humbled that despite having very little, and settling in their apartment only four months prior, they honored me by feeding me. I felt like Um-Samir had accepted me as a child or family member with the tender act of handfeeding me. I noticed a difference in this interview from the first two. While the interviewees of Families 1 and 2 offered me coffee and served me food, they did so on plates and with utensils. Um-Samir fed me by hand, which I interpret as a rural mannerism.

Towards the end of the interview I asked about the peppers I had seen drying outside on the landing. Um-Samir reiterated that she makes everything by hand. Because so many of their dishes require red pepper paste, it was only natural that she make it herself. She thought it was silly to buy something so easy to make and she told me that it would not be clean or taste as good if bought from the store, assuming she could even find it. “The sun here isn’t like the sun in Syria,” she explained, “the sun flavors the peppers as they dry there.” Although she spoke longingly about the flavors of Syria, she was still happy to be making her own red pepper paste to use in her staple dishes.

**The immigrant families.** Each of the three migrant family interviews were conducted in the homes that the Syrian migrants owned. The three families, like the three refugee families, were different from one another in terms of different lifestyles in Syria, religion, and socioeconomic status. While I did not ask for their religions, it was apparent from the Christian paraphernalia in two of the homes and the Muslim names of the participants of the third family what their religion was. Families 4 and 6 were from Damascus, while Jouheina (Family 5) was from Safita, a city in the Tartous Governate in Northwestern Syria.

Each of the three migrant families lived in various towns on the Monterey Peninsula and had all taught, or had retired from teaching, Arabic at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC, DLI for short). DLI is an Army training command that employs native speakers of foreign languages as instructors for their military students.

***Family 4 – Salma & Michel.*** Salma and Michel had been in the United States for thirty years. Salma was sixty-two and Michel was seventy-one at the time of the interview. Despite their tenure in this country, they have strong Syrian food roots. They have two children who are grown. Both also live and work in California. They had careers in the United States, exclusively teaching Arabic at the DLI. Salma still worked full time while Michel was retired.

Their house was impeccable: clean, bright, and clutter-free. I noticed the difference between their house and the dark, crowded apartments of the refugees. They offered me Arabic coffee and homemade sweets as I conducted the interview. The whole interaction was very formal, sometimes Michel would answer a question and when he had given his response, he would then pass the question along to Salma, referring to her as “madam” rather than by her name. They spoke in formal Arabic rather than colloquialisms, as I had experienced with the refugees. Salma would often reference things Michel had said. They told me both of their life in the United States and their life back in Syria. Although Salma did not work when she was married to Michel back in Syria—spending her mornings having *subheeyays* (coffee klatches with friends or neighbors), preparing for the day’s meal, tidying the house, and looking after the children—she was college educated and had worked before marrying Michel. Immigrating to the United States had required her to get a job.

Michel told me that he did not trust most of the food in the United States, claiming that the produce looked too perfect and big to be natural. He, like Mona (Family 1), had heard and read that the meat in the United States often had hormones in it and in fact, he had become a vegetarian after immigrating. He was very particular about his shopping and preferred to eat homemade food, even sweets. He explained, “In this house, the sweets we eat are handmade. We don’t buy store-bought sweets. The madam always makes everything herself.” Salma talked about the Syrian dishes she prepared by hand despite her full-time work schedule. She would often prepare dishes on the weekend and freeze or refrigerate them for the upcoming week. When her children were still in the home, it had been very important for her to prepare Syrian dishes for them: rice and okra, chicken and potatoes, *kebbeh* (meat pies), among others.

***Family 5 – Jouheina.*** Jouheina is a retired Arabic professor who has been in the United States for ten years but had lived in the U.K. for ten years before that. She was seventy-five years old at the time of the interview. I arrived at Jouheina’s house in the evening after work and brought a bouquet of flowers. I found a full dinner made and the table set: chicken, spanakopita, olives, hummus, a salad, bread, and artichokes. She told me that the spanakopita was store-bought. She explained that her health conditions made it difficult to cook and she did not think it was worth the effort as she currently lives alone. Jouheina also has terrible arthritis in her hip and has trouble walking so I did most of the food moving and carrying for her. She instructed me to pour us both a glass of wine from a bottle on the counter and we enjoyed a very pleasant meal before proceeding to the interview.

Jouheina was sophisticated and much more private than the other participants. While the interview was warm and generous, she was the only one who fed me a full dinner, it felt more professional and formal than the other interviews. Jouheina offered me food and welcomed me

into her home, but did not bring up any personal or emotional subjects. Unlike the other twelve interviewees, she did not speak of Syria with nostalgia but was very objective in her descriptions of her homeland, food, and foodways. She came across as very cosmopolitan and modern. Her modernity could in part be due to her non-traditional lifestyle of not marrying and living alone. The nuclear family has a central role in Syrian society and people are expected to marry and have children. Grown adults, both men and women alike, remain living with their parents until they get married. It is common practice for those few unmarried adults to stay living with their families if they never marry. People typically do not live alone but immigration sometimes disrupts this convention since people go abroad for professional or personal reasons. I could not tell, and did not want to ask, why Jouheina had never married.

Jouheina's perspective was different than the other interviewees. While she loved Syrian food and dishes, she rarely prepared the labor-intensive ones because she lived, and had always lived, alone. She was the only interviewee who preferred to do the interview in English rather than Arabic. Due to some medical conditions, Jouheina was very concerned with her health, and since she was having some age-related health issues, she had recently made some adjustments to her diet based on her doctors' recommendations. For example, although she did not have the custom of eating breakfast, she had been told that eating in the morning was healthier and had recently adopted the habit of making herself eggs or a cheese sandwich in the morning. Family 2, Maggie and Abdo, had told me the same thing. Although it was more important to them to get a good breakfast in the kids in the morning, they often had a cheese sandwich or something quick after they had taken the kids to school. Surely the other interviewees were also concerned about their health but the specifics of adjusting their food habits or avoiding certain foods for health reasons had not come up as it had with Jouheina. She went on to tell me that she really missed

Syrian sweets and “in the U.S. sweets are so sugary with no taste.” Although she was limiting her sugar intake because of health concerns, she told me that she still bought Syrian sweets when she went to the Middle Eastern markets.

***Family 6 – Elham & Ghais.*** When I first arrived, Elham offered me coffee, which I politely declined because it was late in the afternoon. She laughed, “You’re just like me, I can’t take coffee in the afternoon either...juice?” I obliged because it would have been rude not to. In Syrian culture, accepting food or drink in another person’s home is very important and a sign of accepting their friendship or company. As a guest, to deny your host the opportunity to feed you or serve you a drink, without providing a health or religious reasoning for why, is considering snubbing them. Not accepting the coffee was acceptable since I provided a legitimate excuse for my refusal but, unless I was diabetic or had another valid reason for why I could not drink juice, it would have been rude of me to deny her the opportunity to serve me something to drink in her home.

Elham answered most of the questions first and would then turn to her husband indicating that it was his turn to answer the question. Elham and Ghais have been in the United States for twenty-seven and twenty-six years, respectively. They were both in their late-sixties and both held tightly to their Syrian food traditions. As a Syrian woman, it is traditionally Elham’s role to cook. She explained to me that her work schedule was demanding so she cooked on the weekends and froze or refrigerated the dishes, which was similar to what Salma (Family 4) had said. Sometimes she would make a dish “three-quarters of the way,” she explained, meaning she would not dress a salad or not bake a dish. She explained that doing this allowed her family to have handmade Syrian dishes ready for the work week. Ghais sometimes bought cold cuts so he could take them to work to eat during his lunch hour. He acknowledged that this was not the



healthiest practice but did it anyway. He told me about the “mortadella” back in Syria and said he thought the cold cuts here in California contained a lot of preservatives, but he ate them anyway, telling me that the meat filled him up. In the middle of the interview Elham got up to get me a *magdoose* (stuffed, pickled eggplant) and a bowl of *tabouli* (parsley salad), both of which she had made. Although she did not feed me with her hands, like Um-Samir (Family 3) had, I felt a similar feeling of acceptance by her sharing her precious handmade food with me.

On the weekends Elham and Ghais regularly went to their daughters’ homes in the Sacramento area, about a three-hour drive from Monterey. Elham told me that when she cooks on the weekends, she always makes extra so that her daughters and their families have home-cooked food around. She told me, “whenever my kids are coming to visit, I spend a week preparing food for them and freeze the dishes. I know my son likes this, his daughter likes that, and his son likes the other meal...so I make them all.” Elham continuing to prepare handmade dishes for her grown children, even after being in the US for twenty-seven years, speaks directly to the importance of maintaining Syrian culture via food. Elham’s children have grown up and made lives in California but her insistence on making them Syrian dishes is her effort to maintain their Syrian identity.

After the interview concluded, Elham brought out a platter of cookies from a local bakery and turned on Syrian television. We discussed the status of my singledom, a very popular conversation topic of concerned Syrian mothers to single people in general, and ate cookies while watching choppy satellite soap operas.

## Common Culinary Customs

Using the methodology described in the previous chapter, I did a close read of the interview transcripts. From them, I inductively culled four common culinary customs. I use these four customs to illustrate the role of foodways in the homing process for Syrian migrants who have resettled in California. The four customs are: the distinct morning coffee ritual; mealtimes and meal routines imposed by work or school; lunch as the day's main meal, which must be *tabekh* (home-cooked food); and the importance of handmade food. I chose these four out of several customs that arose because I find them to be demonstrative of Syrian culture and each play an important role in the homing process. Also, each of these four customs were mentioned by at least one family member during each of the six interviews. Other food customs or practices emerged, such as the shifting gender roles upon immigration, food substitutions, and fear of meat products. I will only focus on the four mentioned above; however, the other customs would make for compelling future research.

**Custom 1: Morning coffee ritual.** All of the interviewees discussed the importance of starting the day with coffee, see Table 3 below for quotes from each interview about the morning coffee ritual. This coffee is customarily served alongside a handmade sweet. I would like to note that the morning coffee ritual that I am using as a custom here is different from the *subheeyay* (morning gathering) mentioned in some of the interviews. While the *subheeyay* is a gathering of women over coffee and sweets before getting on with the day's housework, the morning coffee ritual I am using as the first culinary custom in my analysis is more private, shared with family, and the first thing done in the day upon waking.

Table 3: Morning coffee ritual quotes

Houda, Family 1	“I can’t eat early because I need to have my coffee first, if I have coffee and breakfast I feel like the coffee’s taste is changed. I need something sweet before with my coffee.”
Maggi, Family 2	“First we have a cup of coffee...[with] a piece of sweet, dates, or <i>maamoul</i> (Syrian stuffed cookies) I’ll have made.”
Um-Samir, Family 3	“We always start with coffee. Along with something we’ve made at home. Maybe a piece of cake, sweets, <i>petit four</i> (cookies), <i>maamoul</i> . We’re used to, from back in Syria, making sweets and we make big quantities and keep them in boxes and whenever we want, we take them out and have them.”
Salma, Family 4	“In the morning we wake up and drink a cup of coffee with something small and sweet so as to not drink the coffee on an empty stomach.”
Jouheina, Family 5	“When I wake up in the morning it used to be just coffee...now [in my retirement] I have a coffee that is mainly all milk and one spoon instant coffee.”
Elham, Family 6	“In the morning before work I drink Nescafe because Arabic coffee needs a lot of work.” <sup>7</sup>

Apart from Jouheina (Family 5), who lives alone, all the participants live in family units or as couples and talked about starting the day out slowly with coffee and a sweet and conversation. In Syria, people drink Arabic coffee that is prepared in a *dallah*, the stove-top coffee pot in which the coffee is brewed. The coffee is strong and concentrated as compared to typical U.S. standards. It is often prepared with cardamom, can be prepared with sugar or without, and is served in a demitasse cup. Both cardamom and sugar are personal preferences. In Syria, when purchasing coffee, you go the coffee roaster and they ask you if you want cardamom. If you do, they add it before grinding the beans for you. If not, the beans are simply ground plain. In the Arabic supermarkets in El Cajon and Monterey, Arabic-style coffee is sold

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<sup>7</sup> Nescafe in this context refers to any instant coffee, just like people use the brand name “Kleenex” when referring to any facial tissue.

pre-ground in vacuum-sealed bags. They come blended with cardamom or plain. It is not uncommon to have two (or more) people in the same household take their coffee differently, like in the U.S. If that is the case, however, multiple *dallahs* have to be prepared. Standard Syrian kitchens have numerous *dallahs* in varying sizes. There is also typically one that is used daily, like a preferred knife or cutting board in American kitchens. Unlike brewing coffee in an American coffeemaker where you set it to brew and can walk away, making Arabic coffee requires attention and active work. Making Arabic coffee requires adjusting the stovetop fire to prevent the coffee from boiling over. The person preparing the coffee must monitor this boiling and turn down the stovetop fire or physically remove the *dallah* from the stovetop to prevent an overflow. It is said that the coffee is done after it has boiled three times but then it has to rest for several minutes, covered with a small saucer for the grounds to settle and the flavors to set.

The three refugee families all insisted on preparing Arabic coffee in the *dallah* while the three immigrant families, who had been out of Syria much longer, had become accustomed to preparing coffee in an American coffeemaker or making instant coffee before work. The adaptation of the morning coffee ritual by substituting American coffee for Arabic coffee is an application of Boccagni's notion of an "evolving sense of home." Boccagni posits that "a shifting position can be traced which stands for an individual's everyday experience as a situated way of managing the distance between the real and ideal home" (24). In the morning coffee ritual example, the "ideal home" situation would be preparing and drinking Arabic coffee slowly in the mornings while the "real home" is what is feasible or what is adapted from the ideal home, which in this case is drinking American or instant coffee. Although the immigrants admitted that coffee prepared in a *dallah* tasted better than instant or American coffee, the latter was more

practical for the American fast-paced lifestyle. All the migrant families told me that they prepare Arabic coffee on the weekends when they have more time or when they have guests over.

All but two interviewees said they took a sweet with their coffee. Elham and Jouheina both have medical issues that require them to avoid sweets. Both women explained that while they do not take a sweet with their coffee, they are always sure to have sweets around if a guest were to come over for coffee. “Because that’s how coffee is served,” explained Elham. Nadia Jones-Gailani, an assistant professor of Gender Studies, conducted oral histories of Iraqi women living in diaspora considering the same phenomenon with *qahwa and kleicha* (coffee and a sweet). The word *kleicha* means “a sweet” in both Iraqi and Syrian dialects, although the word refers to slightly different sweets in the two countries. My findings corroborate Jones-Gailani’s on the importance of coffee and a homemade Arabic sweet. Although Syrian and Iraqi culture differ, the countries do share a border and have many similarities. Whether the interviewee had been in the United States for four months (Maggie, Family 2) and was getting her kids ready for school or had been living in the U.S. for thirty years (Salma, Family 4), the day had to start seated with coffee, a handmade Arabic sweet, and time spent together. Both Houda (Family 1) and Maggie (Family 2) said that during this morning coffee time, they would discuss what they would cook for *ghada* (the main meal) that day. “I like to ask my family what are you craving? What haven’t we had in a while?” Houda said. Mona told me that she liked to sleep in late but did not want to miss out on the gossip that happened over morning coffee; she would regularly wake up when she heard her parents stirring, have a coffee and listen to the gossip, then go back to sleep. Mona’s desire to participate in the morning coffee shows the importance of this time spent together over coffee. It is during this morning coffee that Syrians talk about the day, what

is troubling them, what they will cook for lunch, or who the neighbor's daughter is marrying or not marrying.

Most cultures around the world have coffee (or tea) at the start of the day but the morning coffee routine, taken seated with the entire coffee-drinking family before the chaos of the day ensues, is critical for Syrian migrants. During the initial resettling process, as was the case for the refugees, I found that this ritual was practiced much like it was in Syria, in other words, they insisted on making the labor-intensive Arabic coffee every morning. The migrant families adapted the morning coffee ritual to American life by making coffee in coffee makers or preparing instant coffee. Despite foregoing the laborious Arabic coffee prepared in a *dallah*, they maintained the custom of having a sweet and sitting together to talk before work. The Syrians also, in one form or another, collectively expressed that they do not like to take their coffee on the go or be rushed while drinking their coffee. In other words, they devoted a suitable amount of time to the maintenance of this cultural construct.

The morning coffee ritual takes dedicated time out of the day to assert a characteristically Syrian practice. Before the start of the day or preparing for work, the families sit together and talk over coffee. They are intentional about this practice and this intention is crucial to their identity. Salma (Family 4) told me that she plays Fairouz on YouTube while she and Michel drink coffee. Fairouz is a Lebanese singer whose music and voice are associated with Levantine mornings because it is her music that is played on public radio all around the Levant, including Syria. The Levant is known in Arabic as *Bilad al-Sham* and refers to the region of "Greater Syria" from pre-Ottoman rule, which includes Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan. Salma's playing Fairouz on YouTube brings the sounds and nostalgia of Syrian mornings to Monterey mornings and in doing so finding comfort and aspects of her homeland in her new home. I did

not ask the other interviewees if they played Fairouz or any music during their morning coffee ritual, but it would be very interesting to explore this further.

**Custom 2: Meal and meal routines dictated by work or school.** Routine was very important to all of the interviewees and the routines were built around mealtimes. The interviewees explained that their daily meals are; the morning coffee ritual, breakfast, *ghada* (the main meal of the day), and the evening meal. I am listing the morning coffee ritual as part of the meal structure because it came up in every interview when I asked them for the breakdown of their meal routines during the day. These meals are like those in Syria but the times that the meals were taken were shifted in California depending on school or work obligations. Each of these meals had common characteristics among the migrant families. On workdays, both the breakfast and the evening meal were typically *hawader* (prepared foods) “that are always available in the house,” Michel (Family 4) had explained.

The families that had children in the home used “getting the kids off to school” and “when the kids return from school” as time markers for mealtimes. The families that did not have children had full-time jobs but also spoke about the meals surrounding their work schedules. Getting the kids off to school or preparing and going to work were preceded by breakfast for the children and the morning coffee ritual mentioned above for the adults. For those who worked, breakfast was minimal or often taken at work, Ghais (Family 6) told me, “At work I have breakfast. Cheese and bread, something quick with tea.” Maggie (Family 2) told me:

I prepare breakfast for my kids, eggs, cheese, milk. Sometimes a cup of tea next to it. Whatever they prefer. Olives, *zeit w za'atar* (olive oil and thyme spice blend). For us, we first have a cup of coffee. After they go to school, we might have the same thing as the kids or maybe I will make sandwiches on the griddle, cheese or *za'atar* (thyme spice

blend). It is different each time. But for lunch, we wait for the kids to come home from school. [Author's translation]

Also, a distinction was made for foods prepared on the weekends and holidays, when more time could be spent on making and enjoying meals, as opposed to the breakfasts prepared on workdays. Salma (Family 4) shared:

On the weekends, for some it's Fridays off and for others it's Sunday, we have time to make *tiseeyay* (a warm garbanzo bean dish) a very common and popular dish.<sup>8</sup> We may also make *foul mndamas* (fava bean dish) those just because they take time for preparation and one must enjoy the eating of them. [Author's translation]

All of the families enjoyed telling me about the meals they made on the weekends and I couldn't help but compare this to pancakes or waffles on the lazy weekend mornings in American culture. The Syrians are negotiating the homing process by engaging in characteristically Syrian customs. On weekends or days off, they make very labor-intensive breakfasts. On workdays, they tend to adapt their rituals to the time constraints of the required work situation. Around the globe, people work to provide for their families and enjoy their time off with their families or loved ones. During those times off, weekends or holidays, people have more time to create, and recreate, or enjoy the foods and customs of their memories. For those who have never immigrated, it might be the food of their childhood, or the food their grandmother made. For the case of immigrants, it may also be the food of their grandmother, but it is also the food of their homeland.

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<sup>8</sup> Weekends in Syria are Fridays and Saturdays because Friday is the holy day of rest in Islam, the majority religion; *Tiseeyay* is labor intensive, served hot, and eaten slowly.



The main meal of the day, *ghada*, to be discussed in Custom 3 below, was always eaten after school or work. The evening meal was typically light and made up of *hawader* (prepared food). It is important to note that the term *hawader* in Arabic refers to a different type of “prepared food” than in the United States. *Hawader* in Arabic refers to food items such as cheese, olives, yogurt, pickles, and *magdoose* (stuffed, pickled eggplant) that might be considered “preserved food” in the United States.

*Hawader* came up in all of the interviews. While mainly consumed for breakfast and sometimes for the evening meal, it is always present and a staple in the refrigerator and/or pantry. Um-Samir (Family 3) said for the evening meal her family would just have *hawader*, something light and easy that was readily available in the house. Jouheina (Family 5) told me, in English, “I usually eat dinner at home and my dinner is cheese, olives, vegetables. It’s not cooking.” She is describing *hawader* here, although she does not use the Arabic word. Further, the way she uses the word “cooking” implies *tabekh* (cooked food), described in the next section, and refers to what is consumed for *ghada* (the main meal of the day). The presence and consumption of *hawader* brings the Syrian pantry to the American home. The staple dishes of olives, *zeit w za’atar* (olive oil and thyme spice blend), preserves, *magdoose* (stuffed, pickled eggplants), among many others allow migrants to feel at home even after migration. Sometimes these items are substituted based on what is found in the local markets, other times they are handmade in an effort to recreate flavors of home, such as Um-Samir’s red pepper paste, but they all serve as tangible and edible attachments to home.

When navigating the homing process, the migrants structure their days around their meals, applying distinctly Syrian meal practices to American life. This blending of circumstantially mandated obligations such as work and school with Syrian meal structures with

adjusted mealtimes is the very way “Syrianness” is asserted via foodways. The refugees have been in California for a short amount of time but immediately had their children enrolled in school. I assert that in addition to having their children enrolled in school, which came up in the interviews as very important, having Syrian meals for their children and themselves was of utmost importance. The immigrants have been here longer but have maintained Syrian meals and mealtimes adjusted to their work obligations.

**Custom 3: Lunch as the main meal, eaten together, and must be *tabekh*.** The word for lunch in Arabic is *ghada* and the interviewees referred to the main meal of the day as *ghada*. It is important to note that in Arabic the word for lunch, *ghada*, refers to the main meal of the day, not to what time it is eaten.<sup>9</sup> Similar to American dinner, typically eaten after the American working day, around 6:00 p.m., in Syria the main meal of the day is eaten at 2:00 or 3:00 p.m. The work schedule in Syria is built around a long midday break; it is customary for people to go home, take their *ghada*, have a rest, and return to work again in the afternoon. Both Syrian immigrants and refugees referred to their main meal as *ghada* and insisted on eating the meal together as a family. Jouheina (Family 5) told me, “In Damascus there is no lunch hour as such. The lunch is the main meal of the day which is at about 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon.”<sup>10</sup> The families that worked talked about eating small, cold meals at work during the 12 o’clock lunch hour and having *ghada* at home after the working day at 5:00 or 6:00 p.m. While this meal aligns with American dinner time, the families still called it *ghada*. The three immigrant families, acculturated to life in the United States with its rigid work schedule requirements, have

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<sup>9</sup> To this day my father and I still misunderstand one another when he invites me over for *ghada* at 5:00 p.m.

<sup>10</sup> In Arabic, Damascus refers to Syria and the Levant, at large. The word for Damascus in Arabic is *al-Sham*, which is short for *Bilad al-Sham*, Greater Syria.

adapted to eating their *ghada* after work, at 5:30 or 6:00 pm. For the refugee families who did not work and had school-aged children, they had their *ghada* around 3:00 p.m. when the children returned from school. The other trait that came up in all the interviews was that the food eaten at *ghada* must be *tabekh* (hot, cooked food).

***Tabekh* – cooked food.** In Arabic there is a distinction between quick, cold foods you eat, such as sandwiches or *hawader* (prepared foods), and *tabekh* (cooked dishes). Houda (Family 1) put it simply, “lunch is the main meal and has to be *tabekh*.” Michel (Family 4) explained, “The main meal of the day is at 2:00 or 3:00 p.m. and it has to be *tabekh* that the lady of the house prepares. What does she cook? I will leave it to the madam to explain,” and turned to Salma, who spoke of her experience as a *sit bait* (lady of the house) in Syria:

Now, she who works prepares the *tabkhat* (plural of *tabekh*) on the weekends. She who doesn't work, after her husband goes to work she goes down to buy the meat, there you buy the food every day especially if she doesn't work. I would go down and buy the meat fresh for the dish I was making *yabraa* (stuffed grape leaves), *cousa* (stuffed zucchini), rice with beans, any of those Arabic dishes or chicken and I would buy it fresh and start cooking around 11:00. *Baba* (father) would come back from work at 2 and then we would eat. [Author's translation]

Sitting down to eat *tabekh* was an important part of the day for all the migrants. Outside of the home, the migrants adapt to American life by learning (or attempting to learn) English, attending school or getting a job, but inside the home, migrants keep their “Syrianness” alive by returning to the dining table to eat Syrian dishes. Because of the admittedly time-consuming nature of preparing Syrian food, migrants are actively devoting time to keeping a connection to home and to their family.

The homing process is the attaching of a sense of home to a person's life circumstances. Both refugees and immigrants alike find a sense of home in *ghada*. The time *ghada* is eaten may

be different but the effort attached to preparing *ghada* and eating it together, either at 3:00 p.m. or 6:00 p.m. is what is important and how Syrian migrants are recreating home. Similar to the morning coffee ritual, sitting down to have *ghada* together is a time when Syrian migrants can be Syrian at the dining table. They can sit and talk to one another about their daily lives and the new things they are experiencing in this country and do so over a markedly Syrian and handmade meal.

**Custom 4: The importance of food being handmade.** Every interviewee discussed the importance of food being made by hand. This was not simply that food be prepared by hand but the person who makes the food does so with exquisite care and intent for their loved ones. In Syrian culture, the act of preparing food is sacred and feeding one's family is a way of showing love. Just as feeding a guest is a duty of a Syrian host, as seen in my interview with Elham in Family 6 and accepting a host's offerings is the duty of the guest, feeding one's family is not only a way of showing love but also a duty or obligation. Creating Syrian dishes by hand is the way migrants navigate the homing process and are recreating home.

A word that came up repeatedly in the interviews about food preparation was the Arabic word of *yeta'anee*, which means to take one's time in doing something or doing something carefully. Four of the women I interviewed said Syrian ladies are *m'titaneyyen*, the conjugated form for "we take our time to do things carefully." The use of this word in four interviews shows how important attention to detail is regarding food for Syrian migrants. Elham (Family 6) made the claim that it was this *ta'anee* (taking time to do things) that made Syrian food so delicious. In addition to food needing to be handmade, dishes must be visually appealing. The presentation of food is very important and many of the interviewees cited the Arabic proverb, *al-ain ibtakowl* (the eye eats), which is to say that the appearance and visual presentation of the

food is just as important as the taste. Scagliusi and her coauthors found the same thing for Syrians in Sao Paulo, food had to be visually presentable. Attention to detail in the preparation of that same food was very important to Syrians. I talked about the notion of “picking the produce” earlier. For Syrians, the attention to detail begins with food acquisition. Several interviews cited the importance of picking produce that was visually appealing. This attention to detail was maintained through the entire meal preparation. The Baptist minister who had introduced me to Family 1 told me when I met him that they had him and his wife over for a meal to show their gratitude for their help. He told me that he had never seen such beautifully prepared food, “even the salad was decorated with vegetables cut in the shapes of flowers.”

Houda (Family 1) told me about the pickles she made: “We make all our own pickles, everything by hand: peppers, cucumbers, carrots, turnips, cauliflower, cabbage.” Pickles are a staple in Syrian cuisine and are required to accompany certain dishes. For example, you cannot eat *mjadara* (a lentil dish) without pickled beets. Houda complained about how much extra work the handmade dishes involved and all the dirty dishes she would produce in making her children’s favorite meal, macaroni with béchamel sauce. Even so, she insisted upon making these meals and regularly for her family. Regardless of the time, effort, or number of dirty dishes produced, this was simply what was done; making these foods made both the parents and the children feel at home.

Maggie (Family 2) told me that the *ghada* she made daily are always *tabekh* and are served with *mukabilat* (homemade cold side dishes). “Maybe rice and green beans, maybe *ma’aloubay* (an eggplant and rice dish), maybe stuffed grape leaves, maybe hamburgers, but not the kind you find in the store, I make them by hand.” Um-Samir (Family 3) shook her head in opposition when I asked her if she bought her garlic peeled, “No, I peel my own garlic, I don’t

like anything prepared.” Even pre-peeled garlic was considered “prepared” by the interviewees and consequently frowned upon. Houda (Family 1) exclaimed, “Can you believe you can even find hard-boiled eggs in the store?!” laughing at the idea that people would not boil their own eggs. Michel (Family 4) told me:

Pardon me, but the dishes from the Mediterranean need preparation. The lady of the house takes time to prepare these meals, if she wants to make *cousa* (stuffed zucchini), she has to buy the best *cousa* (zucchini, the vegetable) and core it—slowly so as to not break the shell—and prepare the filling, stuff it, and cook it.  
[Author’s translation]

Elham (Family 6) told me about her *cousa* (stuffed zucchini), “I make it with *ta’anee* (special care) not fast fast.” [Repetition in original] *Cousa* (stuffed zucchini) is a common and popular Syrian dish that requires a special kitchen tool, a zucchini corer, that is used to prepare this dish and Um-Samir (Family 3), Salma (Family 4), and Elham (Family 6) told me they had brought one with them from Syria.

The effort involved in meal preparation is how migrants demonstrate their love, maintain connectivity to their home country, and keep their “Syrianness” alive. The Syrian women brought a part of the Syrian kitchen with them by bringing select kitchen tools to be able to continue making staple Syrian dishes. Thirty years later this same zucchini corer keeps the homeland alive.<sup>11</sup> This is the homing process; this is the attaching of a sense of home to the migrant’s life circumstance.

## Discussion

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<sup>11</sup> Another interesting subject to study would be what kitchen tools migrants bring with them when they immigrate. This does not have to be limited to Syrians although that would be the place I would like to start.

I chose these four culinary customs to illustrate the specific role that foodways play in the homing process for Syrians. Select culinary customs, from morning coffee to preparing Syrian dishes and consuming them, define Syrian culture and are maintained, albeit adapted, in a new country. Boccagni's "homing process" is defined as, "people's evolving potential to attach a sense of home to their life circumstances" (23). I demonstrate how migrants, both refugees and immigrants alike, use their Syrian culinary customs to attach a sense of home to their resettling in California. From the moment they wake up and have their coffee until the evening meal, they are asserting their "Syrianness" via their foodways. By maintaining their traditional eating patterns and adhering to characteristically "Syrian" ways of eating, they are resisting dietary acculturation. Effectively, by maintaining these Syrian culinary customs, Syrian migrants can not only "distinguish between their own culture and that of others," but also create home (Ray 162).

Regardless of the amount of time the family had been in California or the socioeconomic background from which they came, the language and culinary customs were in many ways consistent. Syrians see their foodways as how they maintain their culture and identity, regardless of how time-consuming or inconvenient doing so may be. From acquisition, seeking out Arabic markets and ingredients, to preparation, making laborious dishes such as stuffed grape leaves or *cousa* (stuffed zucchini), I found food to be very important to the Syrians I interviewed. This was also the case for the Syrians interviewed in Belgium by Vandevordt and Sao Paolo by Scagliusi and her coauthors. Vandevordt found that even Syrians living in refugee camps paid close attention to honoring their guests, even if that guest was the researcher himself and all they had to offer was the rationed food provided at the refugee camp. Like the Syrians I interviewed, Scagliusi and her coauthors found that Syrian food made Syrian refugees in Sao Paolo "feel at

home.” While I cannot speak for all Syrians who have left Syria, voluntarily or otherwise, those interviewed by Scagliusi and her coauthors, Vandevordt, and myself valued Syrian food and found that Syrian food made them feel at home. Even if not explicitly expressed, like Jouheina (Family 5), it was what she prepared or bought for herself because it was simply what you ate.

The Syrians interviewed see their food as a source of pride. They recognize the care and effort involved in preparing the dishes, want to share them with their loved ones, but also with those that they want to let in. Vandevordt found this to be the case with Syrian refugees in Belgium. He found that Syrians possessed a pride about their food that demonstrates “that their society has something valuable to offer” (615). At a time when their homeland is being devastated by war and their lives have been turned upside down, the Syrian refugees do what they know to maintain their culture. This also extends to the migrants who, despite being away from Syria for many years, also maintained many of these same customs, although adapted for a different way of life.

The Syrians interviewed did not change their culinary routines much in terms of what they ate but some food acquisition practices had altered upon resettling in California, for example, consuming cow’s milk dairy products rather than sheep’s milk dairy products. This is similar to Williams-Forson’s findings involving Ghanaian migrants in the United States, who make food substitutions in order to recreate their cuisine and staple dishes. Food adaptation is required in a new place for immigrants or refugees. Rather than despair about not having the same ingredients or simply foregoing the dishes that require these impossible-to-find ingredients, the migrants make substitutions to cook their staple dishes and by extension, maintain their cultural identity. It is this “eating food from home—or that which is defined as such—[that] helps root migrants to home places and people” (Abbotts 58). As the Syrian migrants eat these



Syrian dishes and eat them in their own way, they are establishing a connection to a new home while at the same time maintaining a connection to their Syrian homeland.

While there were many similarities, there were also differences in how the Syrian interviewees approached their foodways. There was a general distrust of non-Syrian food, especially meat, evidenced. Houda (Family 1), Maggie (Family 2), Um-Samir (Family 3), Salma (Family 4), and Elham (Family 6) all mentioned their preference for Syrian food and not being interested in trying new food items. Houda (Family 1) said when she sees unfamiliar things at the store, she just keeps walking because she does not know where to begin with preparing them. Mona (Family 1), Michel (Family 4), and Ghais (Family 6) all mentioned their skepticism and aversion to what they believed was hormone-infused meat. Michel (Family 4), in this regard, had gone so far as to change his eating habits to vegetarianism; Salma, his wife, explained to me that this was not very difficult to adapt to as many Christian Syrians fast a number of times a year, abstaining from meat. There is even a class of food in Syria that is referred to as *syami* (“of fasting”) which refers to typical Syrian dishes prepared for the fasting time, in other words, without meat. Both *cousa* (stuffed zucchini) and stuffed grape leaves can be adapted to a *syami* (of fasting or meatless) preparation. Salma explained that when Michel adopted a vegetarian lifestyle, she continued to make the Syrian dishes she had always made, but made them *syami*, without meat.

Ultimately, as Syrians make home in California, it is home cooking and Syrian culinary customs that serve as a thread of continuity to their homeland and allows for that “feeling at home.” It is the maintenance of a uniquely Syrian way of eating and foods eaten, despite the new physical home, country, and these adaptations that allows Syrian migrants to maintain their cultural identity. For those preparing and cooking the food, it is putting their *nafas* (breath) in

the dishes they prepare and taking the time to thoughtfully and lovingly nurture their families. It is not simply eating *kibbeh* (meat pie) that allows a Syrian to feel at home. It is eating *kibbeh*: warm and handmade, along with all its *mukabilat* (side dishes), with their family, as *ghada* (the main meal of the day), that allows Syrians not only to feel at home, but also to assert their identity.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

*“Every person has two homelands, his own and Syria.” –André Parrot*

Eating Syrian food and maintaining or adapting characteristically Syrian culinary customs allow migrants to keep the *nafas* (breath) of their Syrian home alive in a new country. The concept of *nafas* in Syrian culture is the “breath” or personal touch that people impart in the food that they make. In this thesis I explore four culinary customs that Syrian migrants maintain as they engage in the homing process, all of which allow for Syrians to feel “at home” and maintain their *nafas* as they create home in California. From the morning coffee ritual and when meals are eaten, to insisting that food be both handmade and *tabekh* (cooked), Syrian migrants make a home and feel “at home” in large part through their culinary customs. Whether they were newly settled refugees or well-established immigrants, the migrants I interviewed in California expressed a devotion to their Syrian culinary customs that reflects a devotion to their cultural identity. Although the sample size of my study was small, the results provide insight into what Syrian migrants experience when navigating the homing process.

My research adds to the literature in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and food studies. In exploring the foodways of Syrian migrants, I show how food and culinary customs serve as critical components in the homemaking process because they allow for the maintenance of cultural identity across borders and in different places. I examine food and culinary customs as they relate to the multiple meanings of home, from the physical space or the abode to the abstract feeling of home. Syrians rely on the memory of their homeland and upbringing as they manage the daily acts of creating and structuring meals. The embodied practice of eating serves as a tangible and visceral reminder of what it is to be Syrian, for both immigrants and refugees

alike. While the experiences of each family and each individual whom I interviewed were unique and nuanced, there were thematic similarities, captured in the four culinary customs that I described in this thesis.

I have sought to add my own *nafas* to this project, specifically, and to the field of food studies in general. I have always played the role of interpreter for my family, not only linguistically but also culturally. I often explain English words and phrases and American customs to my parents, but more importantly, I find myself explaining my family's Syrian customs to our American community. When we had American guests over for dinner as I was growing up, I would explain the order in which things were eaten and what the dishes were. Similarly, in this project I explain not only what is eaten and how it is eaten but also where and how our food customs fit in the context of the homing process. As an insider to both cultures and communities, I am in a unique position to interpret and explain culinary customs and their meanings.

Sharing meals together is not only how Syrians feel at home but how they assert and maintain their "Syrianness." Further, creating handmade food and feeding it to their families allows migrants to keep their Syrian *nafas* alive because eating is a visceral and embodied practice. If eating or sharing *khibz w milh* (bread and salt) creates a bond between strangers in Syrian culture, then it is easy to see that eating with loved ones and as a family unit constitutes an even stronger bond among Syrian families, especially those living in diaspora. When life is uncertain and routines have been disrupted, maintaining traditional foods and engaging in inspired culinary customs inspired by their homeland are ways that migrants use to recreate home.

## Future Research

Due to the limited nature of this study and, thus, access to a small sample size of Syrian migrants, this thesis suggests several avenues for further research. It would be compelling to conduct a more thorough and detailed ethnography of the interviewees who appear here, and to include a larger number of families in the research. I would like to spend more time with the families and experience their foodways with them, from shopping to food preparation and meal consumption, as Krishnendu Ray did in his study of Bengali Americans. This would allow for a more nuanced and detailed exploration of the homing process. A more expansive study on the *nafas* of Syrian migrants would provide insight into this Syrian concept and how it relates to migrant life. Finally, exploring similar concepts among other migrant groups could provide powerful insights into the importance of food culture to other ethnic and national groups.

\* \* \* \* \*

Food and culinary customs are fundamental to daily life, especially for migrant communities. In a country and a world characterized by the mass movement of people, studying eating practices allows us to understand one another a little bit more. More than just understanding what our migrant neighbors eat, I think it is important to learn the *why* and the *how* of their eating practices so we can connect with them or so that they can connect with us. Sharing a meal or *khibz w milh* with our neighbors allows us to experience a different *nafas* in our lives and perhaps create the space for us to learn and grow from them and their culinary customs.

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## APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT, ARABIC

موافقة مسبقة

تطبيق المطبخ السوري في كاليفورنيا، اثنوغرافيا الطهي للاجئين السوريين.

أنت مدعوة للمشاركة في دراسة بحثية تتضمن الحديث عن خبراتك بالطعام عند استقرارك في كاليفورنيا. اسمي سالي باهو، وأنا طالبة في جامعة "باسيفيك"، لقد تم اختيارك كمشاركة محتملة لأنك سورية الجنسية. الغرض من هذا البحث هو تسليط الضوء على خبرات اللاجئين السوريين في الطعام عند توطينهم أو استقرارهم في كاليفورنيا. إذا قررت المشاركة، سوف يطلب منك الإجابة على بعض الأسئلة ممارساتك وتحضيراتك للطعام. ستستمر مشاركتك في هذه الدراسة حوالي الساعة.

هناك بعض المخاطر المحتملة للمشاركين، وهي نفسية واجتماعية، مناقشة وضع اللاجئين أو ذكريات مغادرتهم بلادهم المضطربة، قد يسبب الحزن، ولكن هذا هو الحد الأدنى للمخاطر، والدراسة هي طوعية تماما.

هناك بعض الفوائد لهذا البحث، خصوصا أنك ستساعدينا على فهم تجربة اللاجئين في بيئة جديدة من خلال خبرتك بمجال الطبخ ومشاركة قصتك.

إذا كان عندك أي سؤال عن البحث يرجى الاتصال بي على هذا الرقم XXX-XXX-XXXX أو بالدكتورة ألسون ألكون على هذا الرقم XXX-XXX-XXXX. إذا كان عندك أي سؤال عن حقوقك كمشاركة في مشروع البحث، رجاء الاتصال بمكتب البحوث والدراسات العليا جامعة "باسيفيك" على الرقم 209-716-7716. في حال حدوث حالة إصابة متعلقة بالبحث، يرجى الاتصال بطبيبك ثم إرسال الفاتورة الى شركة تأمينك الصحي، وبعد ذلك الاتصال بمكتب البحوث والدراسات العليا.

أي معلومات يتم الحصول عليها فيما يتعلق بهذه الدراسة والتي يتم تحديدها معك، سوف تبقى سرية ولا يتم الكشف عنها الا باذن منك. التدابير التي سأتخذها لضمان هذه السرية هي أنني سأطلب منك اسم مستعار، وكل الملفات المحتوية على مقابلاتك المسجلة ستكون محفوظة في حاسوبي وتحت كلمة السر المحمية. البيانات التي تم الحصول عليها ستحفظ في مكان آمن محكم الاغلاق، وسيتم تدميرها بعد فترة ثلاث سنوات من اكتمال الدراسة.

ان مشاركتك هي طوعية بالكامل وقرارك فيما اذا كنت ستشاركين أو لا، لن يتسبب بأي عقوبة أو فقدان المزايا التي أنت مخولة لها. فاذا قررت الاشتراك، عندك مطلق الحرية للانسحاب منها في أي وقت.

توقيعك أدناه يشير الى أنك قرأت وفهمت المعلومات الواردة أعلاه، وبأنك وافقت على الاشتراك بارادتك، وبأنك تستطيعين سحب موافقتك بأي وقت والتوقف عن المشاركة بدون أي عقوبة أو فقدان المزايا المخولة

لها, بالتالي حصولك على نسخة من هذه الاستمارة يعني عدم المطالبة بأية حقوق أو مطالبات قانونية أ تعويضات.

سيتم تقديم نسخة من هذه الاستمارة الموقعة للاحتفاظ بها.

التاريخ

التوقيع

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## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT, ENGLISH

*Adapting Syrian Cuisine in California: A Culinary Ethnography of Syrian Refugees*

You are invited to participate in a research study which will involve talking about your experiences with food upon resettling in California.

My name is Sally Baho and I am a student at the University of the Pacific. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are Syrian.

The purpose of this research is to shed light on the food experiences of Syrian refugees as they resettle in California. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to answer some questions about your food practices. Your participation in this study will last about an hour.

There are some possible risks involved for participants. These are psychological and sociological if discussing refugee status or memories of leaving a country in turmoil causes you duress, however, this is a minimal risk and this study is completely voluntary. There are some benefits to this research, particularly that you will be helping us to understand the experience of refugees in a new home through the lens of food and by sharing your story.

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX, or Dr. Alison Alkon at XXX-XXX-XXXX. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project please call the Research & Graduate Studies Office, University of the Pacific (209) 946-7716. In the event of a research-related injury, please contact your regular medical provider and bill through your normal insurance carrier, then contact the Office of Research & Graduate Studies.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Measures to insure your confidentiality are that I will ask you to use a pseudonym and the audio recorded files from our interviews will be stored on my password protected computer. The data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked location and will be destroyed after a period of three years after the study is completed.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time with out penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are

otherwise entitled, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

You will be offered a copy of this signed form to keep.

Signature

Date

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## APPENDIX C: SCRIPT FOR INTERVIEW/FOCUS GROUP

1. How long have you lived in California?
2. Are you from a city or a rural area (in Syria)?

*\*\*What I'd like to do now is learn more about your eating and cooking habits, could you tell me about your meals in a day. \*\**

3. Could you tell me about your morning routine for eating?
4. What do you eat and drink?
5. Do you eat this regularly?
6. Did you eat alone?
7. Did you make it?
8. Would you have eaten this for breakfast back home?
9. Who taught you to make this?
10. Where did you find the ingredients to make it?
11. Could you walk me through a typical morning and your meal preparation? What time you make things, the process?
12. Are you able to find the ingredients to make those dishes?
13. Describe to me the main meal of the day?
14. Who eats that meal?
15. Where is this meal taken?
16. Who prepares it?

*\*\*Now I'd like to know about special events and meals*

1. What event do you associate with a feast? (holiday, birthday)
2. Could you walk me through one of those days, what dishes you would make, who would make them, how long it would take, who would eat when and where?
3. Could you tell me about your first grocery store experience?