“Areas with more immigrants tend to have good food,” says Charles Hirschman, a sociology professor at the University of Washington, Seattle, and author of “The Contributions of Immigrants to American Culture,” published in the Summer 2013 issue of Daedalus. “There isn’t a time in American history when cuisine has existed without the influence of immigrants.”

In Minnesota, Hmong from Laos serve a bitter bamboo soup and a plate of pig’s intestines. Arabs in Dearborn, Michigan, host post-Ramadan feasts of stuffed lamb stomach and Lebanese raw-meat dishes. Kurds in Tennessee prepare breads and family meals of dumplings and greens.
Mongolian families in Denver serve a whole roasted sheep cooked with hot rocks, while in Washington, D.C., tourists and natives flock to Ethiopian restaurants for spicy lamb stew and injera bread. And strollers along the boardwalk at Brooklyn’s Brighton Beach sit at outdoor cafes drinking borscht and eating pelmeni.

The American food system relies on immigrant labor more than does any other segment of the economy. Restaurants have a higher concentration of foreign-born workers than the overall U.S. economy, employing nearly 2.3 million. “Immigrants feed this country,” says Noelle Lindsay Stewart, communications manager at Define American, a media company in Washington, D.C., focused on immigrant rights and identity.

**A WILL TO WORK**

According to New American Economy, New York, 5.5 million foreign-born workers in the U.S. work evenings, overnight and weekends, and are 15.7% more likely to work these off-hours than U.S.-born workers.

Typical is Kazi Mannan, who came to the U.S. from Pakistan in 1996 and immediately began working the graveyard shift, 6 p.m.–8 a.m., as a gas station attendant. Eventually, he got a promotion, and when he received his green card (permanent resident card), he worked three jobs. He bought a car, and began driving for an executive car service. Now, Mannan owns Sakina Halal Grill in Washington, D.C., named for his mother. “They said I was going to work like a donkey when I came here,” he says. “And I was grateful. I wanted the work.”

Maria Cano had been a lawyer, judge and mayor of a small town in Colombia before coming to the U.S. and settling in New York. She supported herself selling arepas at a small food stand under the Roosevelt Avenue railroad tracks. She is now retired, and two of her sons—in classic second-generation immigrant fashion—operate The Arepa Lady, a standalone restaurant.
Cano’s other son, Enseider Arevalo, leads Culinary Backstreets tours in the Queens neighborhoods of Corona and Elmhurst. Culinary Backstreets, founded by Yigal Schleifer in 2009, offers culinary cultural walks in more than a dozen cities throughout the world. More than just selections of indigenous foods, Culinary Backstreets delves into the culture, history and stories of the people and establishments visited. Within easy walking distance on Arevalo’s tour are restaurants, food trucks and stands featuring Guatemalan, Mexican, Argentinian, Chinese, Tibetan, Ecuadorian, Colombian, Uruguayan and Filipino foods. Arevalo is also a manager at Taco Chulo in Brooklyn.

**FOOD STORIES**

With recent immigration policies uncertain and unclear, many organizations, groups and individuals have become advocates for immigrant foods and are promoting restaurants and cooks to expand their following. In Greensboro, North Carolina, Donovan McKnight founded Ethnosh, an organization that fosters cross-cultural discovery/enrichment and drives business to immigrant-owned ethnic food companies.

“One of the best aspects of Greensboro is our food scene, and the best food is not at a steakhouse,” McKnight says. “It is the banh mi you get, or Haitian griot—fried pork with spicy pickled vegetables layered on top. Food, and the stories around how the people who are serving it got here and what their food means to them, promotes a real cross-cultural understanding.”

Among the Ethnosh restaurants in Greensboro is Manny’s Universal Cafe, opened four years ago by Manuel Polanco and featuring the food of El Salvador. Originally, the plan was to sell coffee and pastries, but with patrons asking for hot food, Polanco began preparing breakfast sandwiches, as well. About the same time, his mother Margarita Delgado retired from her job with an institutional foodservice company in New York and moved to Greensboro. She is now in the kitchen, preparing the traditional El Salvadoran food she grew up with—pupusas, tamales and empanadas—growing vegetables in the back of the restaurant and preparing teas with herbs.

When Delgado first arrived in the U.S., she worked as a cashier. However, she soon decided that she would be happier working in a kitchen. She took a position with a foodservice company that provided food to many of the colleges in the surrounding area. “When I went into the kitchen the first time, I asked what I should do,” she says. “And the chef looked at me and said, ‘See those onions? Go peel them.’”

At the cafe, she says, “Every customer is special. I listen to them and try to customize their needs. I care very much about what I am putting on their plates.”

**COFFEE SERVICE**

In an effort to acquaint more people with immigrant foods and businesses, BITE magazine in Phoenix featured a series highlighting the culinary contributions of local immigrants. Among those featured was Eritrean-born Aisha Tedros, whose A.T. Oasis Coffee & Tea Shop features Ethiopian coffee and the traditions accompanying it.

“In Ethiopia, we treat coffee as a ceremony,” Tedros says. “When I first came here seven years ago, I was not happy about running out and grabbing a coffee. I wanted to bring the unity and love behind our coffee service to Americans. I wanted to show people that it is possible to sit down and savor one another instead of running and looking at their phones.”

At A.T. Oasis, she offers a traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony that can take anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour. First, she burns frankincense. Then, she brews the coffee in a round clay pot with a long neck, stuffs dried grass in the mouth of the pot to filter out the bean and pours the coffee.
TAPPING SKILL AND TALENT

Adam Sudmann is a Syracuse, New York, transplant who used to live in Brooklyn where he worked in catering and event production. In Syracuse, he discovered a vibrant and diverse immigrant population with people from more than 31 countries, the largest number representing Bhutan, Congo, Burma, Afghanistan and Pakistan. “There was an untapped skill and talent base here,” he says. “And industry employers said they were desperate for good line cooks and would pay a living wage, particularly if they could find people who were fast, organized, dependable and had a solid foundation.”

Local community leaders and a workforce development team from Onondaga Community College got on board, and with a small workforce development grant, started a foodservice training program. With Love, Pakistan, a teaching restaurant and entrepreneurial incubator at the college, is run by Sudmann. Every six months, the program “incubates” a Restaurateur in Residence featuring a new cuisine. Students learn front-of-the-house and line-cook skills.

At the same time, Sudmann instituted a series of pop-up dinners under the name My Lucky Tummy featuring dishes from area immigrant groups. Recently, Burma was represented with yum mokruatad keow (green tomato, shallot, peanut and black sesame); Pakistan with chaat papri (homemade cracker, yogurt, garbanzo, potato, chaat masala, tamarind, mint and mango grape); Somalia with shakshouka (egg, tomato, toasted cumin, sweet paprika, cayenne and cilantro); South Sudan with ringodel (smoked goat, peanut butter, piri piri and chili); and Syria with halawet el jibn (homemade cheese, semolina, rosewater, lemon, pistachio and rose petal).

RECENTLY ARRIVED

When Manal Kahi came to New York from Lebanon to pursue a master’s degree at Columbia University, she made hummus from a family recipe. After getting continuous praise from friends, she thought about starting a business. Instead, she and her brother Wissam launched Eat Offbeat in November 2016.

The catering company specializes in authentic cuisine cooked by recently arrived refugee chefs, most of whom are women who have never been in a commercial kitchen. Recent menu offerings included sumac salad, fatayer (an Iranian pie stuffed with chicken, mushrooms and pomegranate molasses) and rooz (Iranian rice with chickpeas, crisp potato, dill and toasted sesame).

“Since we launched, we have grown to 20 chefs and served more than 30,000 meals,” says Kahi. “We are delivering all over the city, doing office lunches, individual meals and catering events for more than 400 people.”

Perhaps summing up immigrant culinary contributions best is Mernà Ann Hecht, whose book, Our Table of Memories: Food & Poetry of Spirit, Homeland & Tradition (Chatwin Books, 2016), compiles stories and poetry from recently arrived immigrants and refugees. “From the beginning, it was immigrants who really built the American food scene,” she says. “So if you care about food, you should care about immigration.”

JAN GREENBERG, AUTHOR OF HUDSON VALLEY HARVEST (COUNTRYMAN PRESS, 2003), IS BASED IN RHINEBECK, NEW YORK.