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# Digesting the Disaster: Understanding the Boom of Refugee Food Entrepreneurship in the Face of Increasing Xenophobia

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**DIGESTING THE DISASTER:  
UNDERSTANDING THE BOOM OF REFUGEE  
FOOD ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE FACE  
OF INCREASING XENOPHOBIA**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
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## Introduction

“Syria”. “Terrorism”. “Refugees”. All words that pass interchangeably over our heads. From news story, to video broadcast, the Syrian conflict has attracted Western media attention since it began in March 2011. The Syrian civil war has become an engine of serious suffering. 500,000 people have been killed, and 10 million people have been displaced both internally and externally.<sup>1</sup> Contextually, that is almost half of Syria’s pre-war population. Syrians from all walks of life have reluctantly scrambled to escape the horrors of a war-torn home. Internationally, it is recognized as “the largest refugee and displacement crisis of our time.”<sup>2</sup> Most of the conflict’s refugees are concentrated in Syria’s neighboring countries, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. However, many have gone on further, to Europe and the U.S. with dreams of a better future. This process is far from easy however. Every refugee who hopes to settle in the U.S. must complete a highly extensive vetting process in order to be considered. The multi-layered application takes a minimum of two years to complete, making this the strictest security procedure to enter any country.<sup>3</sup> Between October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011 and December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016, a total of 18,007 Syrian refugees have been admitted into the United States.<sup>4</sup> Since President Trump’s inauguration however, this process has become more stringent. In the last few months, the administration has decided to significantly scale back on the numbers of refugees

<sup>1</sup> Brandt, Jessica , and Robert L. MCKENZIE. “Addressing the Syrian Refugee Crisis.” *Brooking Institution*, Dec. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> “Syrian refugee crisis: Facts, FAQs, and how to help.” *World Vision*, 1 Dec. 2017, [www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syria-refugee-crisis-war-facts](http://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syria-refugee-crisis-war-facts).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Zhong, Jie . “Syrian Refugees in the United States.” *Migration Policy*, 2 Jan. 2017, [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/syrian-refugees-united-states](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/syrian-refugees-united-states).

allowed into the country, going from 110,000 a year, to a mere 45,000.<sup>5</sup> Not only does this make it harder for desperate refugee families to access a better life, but it also plays into the xenophobic narrative that many Western countries are propagating. Being legally accepted into a new country does not equate to being socially accepted. The new refugees only receive government financial support for the first few months of their stay. Soon after their arrival, they are expected to be fully independent and ready to integrate themselves into their new communities – a task much easier said than done. The issues that limit their ability to integrate range from language barriers, to cultural misunderstanding, fear of Islamic extremism, to failure to recognize their foreign degrees and credentials.

Integration is particularly difficult when xenophobic attitudes and anti-immigration discourse is on the rise. While these sentiments are far from new, they are becoming more visible and dominant in the face of globalization. From Europe, to the United States, we are seeing a growth in popularity of ultra-nationalism and racism as a reaction to the new waves of immigration and growth of Islam in Europe. The American election of Trump, the British vote for Brexit, the popularity of the French Front National were all heavily based on populism, xenophobia and isolationism – ideologies that now appear to be standing hand-in-hand. The fear of Muslim immigration in Europe and in the United States is fueled by politicians who capitalize on the fears of Muslim fundamentalists and uncontrolled immigration.<sup>6</sup> Media reports, political statements, and popular discourse constructed around refugees have routinely plagued millions of

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<sup>5</sup> Davis, Julie Hirschfeld, and Miriam Jordan. "Trump Plans 45,000 Limit on Refugees Admitted to U.S." *The New York Times*, 26 Sept. 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/us/politics/trump-plans-45000-limit-on-refugees-admitted-to-us.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/us/politics/trump-plans-45000-limit-on-refugees-admitted-to-us.html).

<sup>6</sup> Timsit, Annabelle. "Things Could Get Very Ugly' Following Europe's Refugee Crisis." *The Atlantic*, 27 Oct. 2017, [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/qa-sasha-polakow-suransky-immigration-europe/543537/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/qa-sasha-polakow-suransky-immigration-europe/543537/).

individuals fleeing their homes from conflict, persecution or natural disasters. Jessica Brandt, a fellow at Brookings, argues that in the last U.S. presidential cycle, candidates “routinely and incorrectly suggested that America risked being ‘flooded by Syrian refugees’” despite the country only resettling 12,587 Syrians in 2016 (a fraction of the six million Syrians in need).<sup>7</sup> While the chance of being murdered by a refugee-related terrorist attack in the U.S., is a mere 1 in 3.4 billion<sup>8</sup>, much discourse has been centered around the dangers posed by Syrian refugees.

Simultaneously, the world is seeing a blossoming popularity of the ‘foodie phenomenon’, where knowledge and appreciation for global food is more apparent and where specialty food is increasingly entering the realm of mainstream. More than ever, people are considering themselves educated about food, and are more likely to pay for food experience. In fact, a study conducted by the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade (NASFT) in 2012 showed that seventy six percent of American adults enjoy discussions about new, interesting foods.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, ethical eating is an increasingly important factor amongst consumers’ food decisions. Those under the age of 35 now show more concern about the preparation of their food, indicating that “food choices aren’t just about the body anymore – they are about the mind too”<sup>10</sup> The rise of social media as a medium for sharing, advertising and discovering new foods has further catalyzed this ‘foodie phenomenon’. Its ability to showcase aesthetic food images on frequently used platforms like Instagram and Facebook, has boosted the growth of food

<sup>7</sup> Krogstad, Jens Manuel, and Jynnah Radford. “Key facts about refugees to the U.S.” *Pew Research Center*, 30 Jan. 2017, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/30/key-facts-about-refugees-to-the-u-s/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/30/key-facts-about-refugees-to-the-u-s/).

<sup>8</sup> Brandt, Jessica, and Robert L. MCKENZIE. “Addressing the Syrian Refugee Crisis.” *Brooking Institution*, Dec. 2016. 342

<sup>9</sup> Sloan, Elizabeth. *The Foodie Phenomenon*. *The Foodie Phenomenon*, itf.org.

<sup>10</sup> *Ethics On the Go*, 2017, *Ethics On the Go*, [culinaryvisions.org/trends/?p=723](http://culinaryvisions.org/trends/?p=723).

movements. It has also led to the rise in popularity of different types of food outlets, from fine-dining restaurant to roadside pop-ups, which cater to this new interest of international cuisine and ethical food practices. Consumers are using these social media platforms to demonstrate their interests of these food movements (fine dining, socially conscious cuisines, local produce etc...) by following and engaging with these particular food accounts, or posting related images out to their followers. This pattern of consumption can be traced back to Pierre Bourdieu's 'theory of distinction'<sup>11</sup> which proposes that the development, creation and enforcement of taste is a product of cultural capital and that as a result, "distinctions of taste become the basis for social judgment".<sup>12</sup> The types of food people choose to share on their social media therefore become signifiers of their tastes, beliefs and inherently their status in society.

Over the last few years, there has been a drastic increasing in the launch of food-start ups. Many of these enterprises, analyzed in this paper, were born between 2015 and 2016. Individuals are harnessing the power and influence of the food industry to make a difference to refugees looking for a place in their new society. Between New York, D.C., Vancouver, London and Paris, new restaurants, pop-up eateries, delivery start-ups, food festivals and community kitchens are making their mark as the 'new' social enterprises. From *Eat Offbeat* and *Foodhini* that concern themselves with providing authentic and delicious delivery options, *Displaced Kitchen* that facilitate refugee hosted dinners, *Newcomer Kitchen* that creates a once weekly delivery and community cooking space for

<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, et al. *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Distinction. In: Harvard University Press. <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674212770>.

Syrian women, to *Refugee Food Festival* that showcases Syrian chef's skills in high-end kitchens all around Europe, the foodie refugee revolution is taking over the scene.

In a new, interesting manner, the Syrian refugee crisis, the strengthening of xenophobia and this global food phenomenon have all begun to overlap. Ironically, both xenophobia and the foodie appreciation for foreign, 'ethnic' foods, are growing in opposite and related ways.

Over the last few years, we are seeing an emergence of new food entrepreneurship across the globe. In the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, these food-related social enterprises are not only providing job opportunities to refugees but they are also increasing awareness about their cause and creating new narratives surrounding their arrival. This present study seeks to contribute to the knowledge surrounding refugees and entrepreneurship by explaining how several refugee food enterprises have gained great popularity despite greater nationalism and xenophobia.

In the analysis of food entrepreneurship, one finds that this phenomenon is able to partly fill the void of certain organizations and movements by placing food in the role of the mediator. Arguably, food entrepreneurship assists in areas that refugee resettlement agencies do not, as they provide a platform that give refugees agency rather than dealing with them as victims. These agencies address refugee's agency as business employees, and in some cases, encourage their agency as women. Not only does this reverse the narrative of victimized refugees who need support from their new societies whilst also



providing them with income, it also provides an opportunity to politically mobilize around refugee-threatening issues.

This paper argues that these refugee-based businesses are not growing independently from the context of anti-immigration in which they are born in, but because of the increased xenophobia by creating alternate narratives and capturing the interest of those looking to resist. I find that the explorative and booming foodie culture is being used by individuals and organizations to give back and give a voice to certain population in need, notably, Syrian refugees. These new food enterprises provide an avenue for pushback in the face of adversity, of anti-immigration and of anti-diversity, that is plaguing large parts of the West. Their emergence and popularity may be founded in the very bane of a growing xenophobic world.

I will do this by evaluating how food entrepreneurship:

1. Counters the perception that Syrian refugees are an economic burden by highlighting the ways in which their presence culturally enriches and educates their new societies
2. Refutes the perception that Syrian refugees enforce problematic traditional Middle Eastern and Islamic values regarding women
3. Mediates current political events by capturing local movements of resistance against xenophobia

## **Food Entrepreneurship’s role in countering the perception the Syrians are merely ‘tragic’ asylum seekers looking to be rescued**

As the Syrian refugee crisis has unfolded over the last five years, clear dominant media narratives have been formed to exacerbate clear binary perceptions of a newly vulnerable population. In media imagery, refugees are either hyper-visible; portrayed as terrorists, dangerous or unwilling to adapt to their new societies. Or, they are invisible and dehumanized; perceived as a mass, void from personality, stories, and feelings. General connotations associated with refugees within media address issues of criminality, illegitimacy and threat to both the national identity and economy of their host country<sup>13</sup>. These debasing forms of representations limit our ability to relate to refugees by distilling fear and emphasizing distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

And while these wrong and unjust perception are highly destructive to refugee well-being and advancement, the narrative of victimization also holds major flaws.

One of the most reoccurring themes in Western media is vulnerability, according to an analysis on the representation of Syrian refugees in the U.K. By examining articles from four of the most-read U.K. news outlets - The Telegraph, The Guardian, The Sun and The Mirror - the author determines the importance “given to Syrian child refugees as the main victims of the conflict”.<sup>14</sup> Out of the sixty articles examined, twenty-nine mentioned children and vulnerable victims, with words like ‘child’ and ‘families’ appearing extensively. “Vulnerability is then to be seen as a warranty for the conditions

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<sup>13</sup> Haynes A (2004) Fear, Framing and Foreigners: The Othering of Immigrants ... Dissertation

<sup>14</sup> Venir A (2014) UK Media Representation of Syrian Refugees: A Focus on the Press. Dissertation. 13

of Syrians as deserving of aid and hospitality, and as a characteristics which easily elicits the reader's empathy".<sup>15</sup> Whilst this emphasis on vulnerability is often successful in eliciting an emotional response from the readers, it nonetheless portrays refugees in a negative light.

In a study about 'The Subaltern and the Politics of Representation, author Ramaswami Harindranath argues that "the issues of representation and agency coalesce in contemporary manifestations of subalternity." <sup>16</sup> The connecting properties of food, based on the primal instincts of survival and sharing, may help to mend the distances between newly settled refugees, their host communities and these academic discourses to ease the difficult process of integration.

The rise in popularity of food-related social enterprises, may educate these broader discourses and provide a better understanding of how to deal with this situation, especially in the context of resistance to immigration. Perhaps, the first way to do so is by remolding the perception that refugees are primarily and forever 'charity cases'.

This section will examine the ways in which food entrepreneurship act as a method of 'reverse victimization'. In general, they contest the general narrative of refugees by showing that they 1) Are similar to everyone else, valuable contributors to the economy, 2) Can offer a services and skills that are lacking- such as the expertise in 'new' international cooking, and 3) Have the agency to speak for themselves.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 15

<sup>16</sup> Harindranath, Ramaswami. *Perspectives on Global Culture*. Open University Press, 2005. 55

## Refugees as contributors to the Economy

Much food entrepreneurship acts against this belief that refugees are primarily charity. Mainstream media discourse generally represents refugees as being poor individuals, with little to offer, who need to rely heavily on their new communities in order to survive. Whilst this narrative does not always intend to be harmful, the creation of a “victim frame”<sup>17</sup>, where refugees are portrayed as playing the archetypal role of the innocent victim” can further hinder their ability to construct their own narrative. The media focus on children, families and less-abled individuals generates both a sense of relatability and despair. There may be a risk that refugees “as active actors might be silenced or marginalized in favour of what Birgitta Höijer describes as sensationalism, or commodification of suffering”.<sup>18</sup>

This belief often implies that the aid comes in a single direction, where support flows from the community to the newly settled refugees. Anti-immigration narratives often justify their xenophobic beliefs with this argument and frame their sentiments in terms of national security.

*Eat Offbeat* provides a great example of a company that pursues an anti-victimization narrative to provide their refugee employees the best opportunities.

*Eat Offbeat* is a food delivery start-up in New York City that hires twelve refugees as chefs to provide delicious and authentic meals from around the world. One of their missions is to “change the narrative around refugees and show them that they are

<sup>17</sup> Van Gorp, Baldwin. “Where is the Frame?” *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2005, pp. 484–507.

<sup>18</sup> Venir A (2014) UK Media Representation of Syrian Refugees: A Focus on the Press. Dissertation.

bringing a lot of value into the country”<sup>19</sup>. According to their founder and CEO, Manal Kahi, they want New Yorkers to see them in a different light and to appreciate these chefs as regular contributors to the economy.

“They are not here asking for charity, all they need is an opportunity to work. It’s about flipping the table on that, showcasing a story that is the exact opposite. They are here, bringing value, being a regular employee; paying their taxes.”<sup>20</sup>



Figure 1: Eat Offbeat: The Cookbook. NYC, 2017.

Kahi makes it a point on that *Eat Offbeat* is first and foremost a business who hire chefs beyond their refugee status. In all her interviews, Kahi explains that the

company was born out of New York

City's failure to provide adequate hummus. Only from then, did she consider involving women of Middle Eastern and other international refugee backgrounds to assist in her new business. The website is constructed to at once, inform the viewer about the food delivery platform (with menus, order information and testimonials) and describe their role as a social enterprise. The tension between raising awareness and sympathy for these refugee women, and the need to empower them as social agents, is reflected in how the company showcases its chefs. On one hand, they showcase the 'The Offbeat Chefs' by

<sup>19</sup> Klich, Tanya. “Queens Food Delivery Startup Hires, Trains Refugees as Chefs.” *Spectrum News NY1*, May 2016, [www.ny1.com/nyc/queens/news/2016/05/12/queens-food-delivery-startup-hires--trains-refugees-as-chefs.html](http://www.ny1.com/nyc/queens/news/2016/05/12/queens-food-delivery-startup-hires--trains-refugees-as-chefs.html).

<sup>20</sup> Sola, Katie. “Inside Eat Offbeat, The Refugee-Run Kitchen That’s Satisfying Adventurous Eaters With A Taste For Social Good.” *Forbes*, 22 Aug. 2016, [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com).

their portraits, names, dishes and countries. On the other hand, they make it a point to inform the viewers about their status as refugees, that all the food is “made by refugees”, “prepared and delivered by refugees resettled in NYC”<sup>21</sup>. Whether this branding is purposefully crafted to change perspectives of refugees or simply for economic reasons, it reveals the company’s internal conflict of highlighting their new, authentic, ethnic dishes, as well as their support of refugees.

This is a similar narrative provided by *Refugee Food Festival*, a French-based initiative to get refugee chefs cooking in great European restaurants for a day. One of their big ambitions is to change people’s negative perceptions by showing them “that behind this ‘refugee crisis’, there are talented men and women with skills and know-how that are waiting to be uncovered and put to good use in their host country”<sup>22</sup>. This is shown through their extensive application process and criteria ensuring high quality service that meets European chefs and customer’s expectation. The criteria indicate that the individual must not only have excellent cooking skills, but also be confident in managing a restaurant’s kitchen (by creating the restaurant’s menu, leading the kitchen staff and pleasing its guests) and have aspirations to work in the food industry<sup>23</sup>.

With this in mind, the festival aims to facilitate professional integration for the chefs whose skills are showcased during the event. Their goal is to use “food as a means of social and professional integration by putting forward the cuisine, skills and talents of refugees”<sup>24</sup> whose creations in the kitchen are unlike what is typically seen in European restaurants. The establishment of a showcasing and networking platform provides agency

<sup>21</sup> “Eat Offbeat: Order meals made by refugees now chefs in New York.” *Eat Offbeat*, eatoffbeat.com/.

<sup>22</sup> Martin, Louis. *Refugee Food Festival Kit*. *Refugee Food Festival Kit*, Food Sweet Food and UNHCR.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

to the chefs to interact and impress the locals foodies, restaurateurs and chefs through their work in the kitchen. This event has proven fruitful for chefs like Mohammad El Khaldy from Damascus, Syria. In an interview with the UNHCR, he gleefully stated that “Paris was my dream place to work. Paris is the mother of service, cuisine, the famous capital of hospitality, fashion, food, gastronomy. If you put Paris on your CV, you are a professional. This is what we say in Arab countries.”<sup>25</sup> His involvement in Refugee Food Festival was recognized and he was later hired to cater a dinner for Kenzo at Paris Fashion Week. Since, El Kahldy has used these opportunities as spring boards into a stable job in the Parisian restauration scene. He is now a culinary consultant and the founder of an events catering company that caters between fifty to a thousand people.<sup>26</sup>



Figure 2 Mohammad El Khaldy. How Paris is supporting refugee integration through an innovative food festival. UNHCR. Paris, 2017.

### Refugees as Beneficial Contributors to Society

By creating a narrative that refugees are offering new, delicious and authentic food experiences, food initiatives are fighting against the misconception that refugees are simply victims (and potential burdens) to their new communities. Based in New York City, *Eat Offbeat*, capitalizes on New Yorker’s culinary adventurous tendencies to

<sup>25</sup> Schmitt , Celine. “Former Syrian TV Chef Whets Appetite of Paris Fashion Fans.” *UNHCR*, Mar. 2017, [www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2017/3/58cfd8604/former-syrian-tv-chef-whets-appetite-paris-fashion-fans.html](http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2017/3/58cfd8604/former-syrian-tv-chef-whets-appetite-paris-fashion-fans.html).

<sup>26</sup> *Chef Khaldy*, [Chefelkhalidy.com/](http://Chefelkhalidy.com/).

provide jobs for refugee women from around the world. The company was born out of Manal Kahi's dissatisfaction with New York's standards of Middle Eastern cuisine, which she craved from her home in Lebanon. After much work, partnership with her brother, internal investments, a Tamer Center Grant, and assistance from the International Refugee Committee (IRC), this start-up has gained footing as one of the most well-known refugee food enterprises.

Because of the diversity of its twelve chefs, the delivery food service caters everything from Nepali Momos and Iraqi Kibbeh, to Syrian Baba Ghannoush. The company focuses their message on providing authentic and home-cooked ethnic meals that are hard to find elsewhere in the city. In an interview, she states that their food aims to make you "feel like you're in downtown Baghdad, for instance, or that you've been invited to a chef's own home."<sup>27</sup> Their motto; "discover authentic off-the-beaten path cuisines made by refugees"<sup>28</sup> places the importance of cuisine exploration and diversity over their hiring of refugees. This narrative construction may be a deliberate attempt to first attract the explorative 'foodie' personality of their New York audience, and linking this satisfaction to the people behind the dishes. As she states in an informational video, Kahi's main goal is to "get to a point where Americans say, wow we are lucky to have these refugees resettle among us because they are bringing us so much value with these new recipes that we wouldn't have had the chance to try."<sup>29</sup> Arguably, this promotes the idea that cultures are something to be consumed and commodified for our desires. Arjun Appadurai, the anthropologist, takes this idea further by arguing that "food can be used to

<sup>27</sup> Mitzner, Dennis. "New initiatives emerge to help refugees." *TechCrunch*, 30 Apr. 2016, techcrunch.com.

<sup>28</sup> "Eat Offbeat: Order meals made by refugees now chefs in New York." *Eat Offbeat*, eatoffbeat.com/.

<sup>29</sup> Sola, Katie. "Inside Eat Offbeat, The Refugee-Run Kitchen That's Satisfying Adventurous Eaters With A Taste For Social Good." *Forbes*, 22 Aug. 2016, www.forbes.com.



mark and create relations of equality, intimacy or solidarity or, instead, to uphold relations signaling rank, distance or segmentation”.<sup>30</sup> Based off Bourdieu and Appadurai’s theories, the consumption and appreciation of food created may be indicative of an individual’s status in society.

The *Refugee Food Festival* aims to change the narrative in a similar way, where refugee chefs are the most direct link for people to experience less-known cuisines from around the world in the comfort of their own cities. By showcasing dishes from their home countries and their ability to work in a European cuisine, these chefs are appreciated as bearers of their culture within a Western context. One of the objectives described by the *Refugee Food Festival* ‘kit’, is to help people be exposed to new foods. This is a “way for people to discover the best cuisines from around the world, especially some that are less known: Afghan, Iranian, Syrian, Sri Lankan, Chechen, Tibetan or Ethiopian”<sup>31</sup> states their brochure. While this message is not as highlighted as it is in *Eat Offbeat*, it nonetheless reveals a theme in the way in which refugees are framed as contributors to society, rather than dependents of it.

Many food enterprises like *Eat Offbeat* and *Refugee Food Festival* are turning the victim narrative of refugees on its head. Through their businesses, they aim to show their host cities that refugees’ knowledge of certain cuisines is a valuable asset in this increasingly globalized foodie world. As mentioned in the introduction, the concept of being a ‘foodie’ and being curious about new cultural cuisines is gaining increasing popularity. By latching on to this trend, food enterprises are proving that they can satisfy

<sup>30</sup> Appadurai, A. *Gastropolitics in Hindu South Asia*. . American Ethnologist, 1981. 494-511

<sup>31</sup> Martin, Louis. *Refugee Food Festival Kit*. *Refugee Food Festival Kit*, Food Sweet Food and UNHCR.

these foodie trends and promote new ‘undiscovered’ cuisines, while also providing refugees with jobs. They show their public that aid comes in form of a two-way street. If given the chance, refugees are just as able to help their new communities, as their community is able to support them. As a customer of one of the French restaurants participating in the Refugee Food Festival mentioned, “It’s gives a very different look on refugees, who are usually shown through the sadness of their experience, not their skills. They are people like us after all, who have stories to tell and a lot to share”.<sup>32</sup>

So far, public praise and support has been plentiful for these food social enterprises. Eat Offbeat, for example, was just recently awarded one of the WeWork’s 2017 ‘New York Creator Award’ for the valuable, non-conforming, impact they are having on refugee and New Yorkers’ lives.<sup>33</sup> It is also important, however, to consider these businesses with a more critical eye. This will enable us to more fully understand how they might or might not be assisting with refugee integration, and what some of these implications are.

One can argue for example, that to a certain extent, these enterprises are capitalizing on social trends and perceptions of Syrian refugees to further their own gain. Whether a problematic ‘authentic’ narrative is being constructed to appeal to their Western audience or food and taste choices are being made for their consumption, one sees that food enterprises are not unchained from the biases and context in which they

<sup>32</sup> Rubin, Alissa J. “From Refugee Chefs, a Taste of Home.” *The New York Times*, 5 July 2016, [www.nytimes.com/2016/07/06/dining/refugees-chefs-paris.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/06/dining/refugees-chefs-paris.html).

<sup>33</sup> Riley, Bridget. “Let’s Hear it for New York: Hometown Heroes Win at Creator Awards.” *WeWork*, 27 Nov. 2017, [www.wework.com/es-MX/creator/creator-awards/lets-hear-new-york-hometown-heroes-win-creator-awards/](http://www.wework.com/es-MX/creator/creator-awards/lets-hear-new-york-hometown-heroes-win-creator-awards/).

exist. This may have a significant effect on the perception of refugees and the refugees' attempts to reconstruct a new life.

For one, authenticity sells. Increasingly, we are seeing an appeal for more varied, 'ethnic' and 'authentic' cuisines. While the word authenticity opens up a whole new debate, it is important to acknowledge in this context that prides itself on the true, original and authentic nature of the food provided. The claims to authenticity are visible in the messaging of all these food enterprises in order to reach their intended audience. *Eat Offbeat*'s "authentic off the beaten path cuisine,"<sup>34</sup> or Foodhini's "authentic multicultural meals, crafted by emerging immigrant chefs, delivered to your door"<sup>35</sup> clearly demonstrate their reliance on the meal's real connections to their homelands.

An issue that arises from this claim to authenticity is the interpretation and appropriation by the consumers themselves. One finds many contemporary examples of the appreciation for a certain aspect of a culture, while disregarding or condemning the rest. This selective appreciation is just as prominent in relation to food, where individuals love specific cuisines but may not care for the people and culture behind it. Take Middle Eastern cuisine for example. Considered a favorite amongst 'ethnic' cuisines, Middle Eastern food has often been embodied by a delectable spread of hummus, kebabs and pita. While the west generally welcomes its food with open arms, it is not so accepting of its people. In her book, 'Day of Honey', Annia Ciezadlo recalls the reactions New Yorkers had to 9/11 through the lens of food. She describes the types of new stories that circulated New York at the time. Many featured photos of immigrants holding out their

<sup>34</sup> "Eat Offbeat: Order meals made by refugees now chefs in New York." *Eat Offbeat*, eatoffbeat.com/.

<sup>35</sup> *Foodhini*, foodhini.com/.

native food, “their eyes beseeching, “Don’t deport me! Have some hummus!””.<sup>36</sup> In this case, immigrants used food as a symbol for peace and as the only justifier for their ‘right’ to be in the U.S., acknowledging that their place in society is resting on very weak foundations.

‘Orientalism’ also plays a role in the construction of narrative created by some of these businesses. The term first put forward by Edward Said in 1978, describes the patronizing Western construction of what is considered to be the Middle East, or the Orient.<sup>37</sup> His analysis highlights the relationship between representation and power, as a fundamental determinant for our perception of the ‘other’ today.

*“The Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear the figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe”*<sup>38</sup>

Through this lens, we can more critically look at the ways in which food businesses rely on these generalizations. Much of their efforts go towards resisting stereotypical oriental imagery that is rooted in the subconscious (or conscious) belief of the ‘other’ as being inferior, incapable and somewhat barbaric. However, we also see examples of how they might be playing into the oriental narrative to appeal to these subconscious perceptions. *Eat Offbeat*’s combination menus are appointed names themed around the Arabic folk series of *A Thousand and One Nights*. The combination meals (which include a mix of multicultural dishes) are given names such as “Wanderer’s

<sup>36</sup> Ciezadlo, Annia. *Day of honey: a memoir of food, love, and war*. Free Press, 2012. 6

<sup>37</sup> Said, Edward . *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 63

Trail”, “Explorer's Delight”, “Simbad’s Trek”, “Shahrazad's Feast”<sup>39</sup>. Whilst these names are not inherently Western constructions, they nonetheless cater to the West’s limited scope and preconceived notions of a mysterious and magical orient that is encompassed by fictional stories.

### Refugees have a voice of their own

Another way in which refugee entrepreneurship reframes the harmful and detached stereotypes associated to them is by sharing their stories as an accompaniment to the food. Unlike many immigrants, whose work is usually designated to being behind the counter, behind the kitchen, and in the behind-the-scenes, these ventures are showcasing the refugees and their stories at the forefront. Every venture associated to refugees, has pursued the sharing of these experiences as a way of engaging their audience, the media and in turn the politics of the country. *Displaced Kitchen* for example, organizes a space in which a refugee chef, or as they say “Chef-ugee”<sup>40</sup>, creates a feast for local New Yorkers. The meal becomes a space in which people have a chance to meet the refugee and hear their stories, while also savoring new foods. The D.C. based *Foodhini*, on the other hand, uses its reach as a delivery start-up to share the refugee’s stories. Each food delivery order comes with a personalized pamphlet about the chef,

<sup>39</sup> “Eat Offbeat: Order meals made by refugees now chefs in New York.” *Eat Offbeat*, eatoffbeat.com/.

<sup>40</sup> “Displaced Kitchens.” *Komeeda*, komeeda.com/series/3.

their story and their suggestions on how to eat the food. The founder hopes to instill the interest that “what makes the meal special, is the person behind it”<sup>41</sup> as a means of spreading awareness and resistance. While *Eat Offbeat* focuses less on the portraying its chefs are refugees, it nonetheless features them individually on their



Figure 3 A chef's note from Lobsang Dorjee Tsering for a customer hangs on a food delivery packet at Foodhini in the District. Washington D.C. , Aug. 2017.

website, accompanied by the dishes they curate. Additionally, they are in the process of creating an ‘*Eat Offbeat*’ cookbook which will boast 80 recipes from 20 chefs. Each chef will have a chance to share their stories, their connections to the dishes and describe the culture they came from. Does this work?

In an interview with the founders of Displaced Dinners, they recall their success with bringing different people together around food. They reveal a dinner when Lutvi, their first Syrian Chefugee, hosted a ten hijabi girl from NYU, a Syrian woman late on her rent and ten republican lawyers from Wall Street. By the end of the dinner, after hearing one another’s’ stories, the lawyers came together and agreed to pay the woman’s due rent. “Humanity had prevailed” says one of the founder’s Nasser Jaber,<sup>42</sup> While self-selection is an inherent issue (since most attendees are already sympathetic to the cause),

<sup>41</sup> *Foodhini*, foodhini.com/.

<sup>42</sup> Kamin, Sari. “Komeeda with Jabber Al-Bihani and Nasser Jaber | Heritage ...” *Food Without Borders*, Heritage Radio Network , Sept. 2017, heritagerradionetwork.org/podcast/komeeda-with-jabber-al-bihani-and-nasser-jaber/.

it nonetheless spreads awareness, brings unlikely groups of people together, and creates pockets of resistance.

Unlike many immigrants working primarily behind the scenes of the food industry (with very little visibility and voice), refugees are encouraged to take center stage. Very often “the issue of culture and politics come together in the representation-agency dialectic,”<sup>43</sup> where the mainstream creates the story of the refugee, adding to their misinterpretation and lack of support by the local population. Emancipation is only realized when the refugee or “subaltern” finds a voice “that both challenges dominant representation and provides an alternative world-view.”<sup>44</sup> In an increasingly xenophobic context, that believes refugees are hindrance to society and a threat to national security, refugees are finding an alternative voice through food.

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<sup>43</sup> Harindranath, Ramaswami. *Perspectives on Global Culture*. Open University Press, 2005. 56

<sup>44</sup> Harindranath, Ramaswami. *Perspectives on Global Culture*. Open University Press, 2005. 56

**Food Entrepreneurship's role in countering the perception that Syrian refugees enforce problematic traditional Middle Eastern and Islamic values regarding women**

Another important way in which food enterprises resist the misconceptions that Syrians are unable to fully integrate into society, is by providing platforms that support Syrian women. Much of the narrative against immigration and refugees is based around the belief that people originating from the Middle East do not have the same morals and values. Marc Vallendar, of the German right-wing shared the common belief that “there are plainly and simply fundamental cultural differences between Europe and the Middle East,” he wrote. “Not for nothing are these countries all engulfed in flames.”<sup>45</sup> Much of the political conversations surrounding cultural differences revolve around the role of women in society. The belief is that the primarily Muslim refugee population has “dangerous cultural values”<sup>46</sup> that are not only irreconcilable with Western mentality but also put the host population at risk. The argument that there will be an increase in “sexual violence in Europe”<sup>47</sup> is commonly used against admitting refugees into the country.

Hypocritically, the same types of parties (in Europe and the U.S.) refuse to acknowledge the voice of Muslim women. Founder of Muslim.Girl.net, Amani Al-Khatahtbeh, tells Huffington Post it is “very rare for us to be given a platform... in mainstream media... We just keep getting spoken over by the public and the people trying to tell us what our religion means for us and that we're oppressed by our

<sup>45</sup> Abrahms, Max. “Five Myths About Syrian Refugees | Foreign Affairs.” *Foreign Affairs*, Mar. 2017, [www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com).

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*



religion”.<sup>48</sup> Western political and public opinions are largely based on Western criteria of societal norms and values without considering the cultural context of other types power dynamics. Women are often silenced, their bodies being sites of contention between Western politicians and their traditional customs. The hypocrisy also lies in the fact that Europeans and Americans were far from respecting women’s rights just two generations ago, and continue to disappoint in many of its aspects. In order to provide a healthy space for conversation, mutual understanding and progress, one needs to:

*“focus attention on the manner in which women migrants are represented in the official discourse, their movement having been rendered invisible by law. These women in reality engage in negotiations with the larger institutions and the state, however, the latter by silencing them, make their agency negligible”<sup>49</sup>*

Forces are at work to counter these harmful assumptions and shift the power back to refugee women. Women-centered food enterprises for example, not only provide refugee women with jobs, but also counter the narrative of the ‘oppressed’ woman of the Middle East by helping them indirectly redefine their roles in their community and construct a healthy community around them.

### Redefining Women’s Roles

<sup>48</sup> Gebreyes, Rahel. “Amani Al-Khatahtbeh Explains How Muslim Women Are 'Spoken Over By The Public' And Their Voices 'Ignored'.” *The Huffington Post*, 25 Mar. 2015, [www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/25/muslim-women-voices\\_n\\_6939740.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/25/muslim-women-voices_n_6939740.html).

<sup>49</sup> Thapan, Meenakshi. *Transnational migration and the politics of identity*. Sage, 2007. 21

A strength of food entrepreneurship, is its ability to provide safe spaces for specific communities, while also creating a movement for change and political resistance. Creating community-cooking opportunities for women refugees has given them a space to recreate their roles within society (and their families), while also remaining in a comfortable environment. Immigration brings about tremendous changes to those involved. From new institutions to different social norms, refugees have no choice but to adapt if they wish to be successful in their new environment. Nilufar Ahmed, a Senior Research Officer at Swansea University argues that “migration offers women the opportunity to re-define and recreate roles for themselves”<sup>50</sup>. While this experience can both be positive and negative, it nonetheless implies that women’s roles are not fixed and instead, are reliant on both their culture and their context. Food entrepreneurship can be seen as both a place where women can break from their traditional roles, and where they might also reinforce them. Swansea University argues that “migration offers women the opportunity to re-define and recreate roles for themselves”<sup>51</sup>. While this experience can both be positive and negative, it nonetheless implies that women’s roles are not fixed and instead, are reliant on both their culture and their context. Food entrepreneurship can be seen as both a place where women can break from their traditional roles, and where they might also reinforce them.

*Eat Offbeat*, which is fully staffed by women refugee chefs, creates an avenue for women to be seen beyond both their gender and their refugee status. In the kitchen, they are first and foremost chefs, and not mothers, daughters and wives. From their first day

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<sup>51</sup> Ahmed, Nilufar. “Women in Between: The Case of Bangladeshi Women Living in London.” *Transnational Migration and the Politics of Identity*, edited by Meenakshi Thapan, vol. 1, Women in Migration in Asia, 2005. 104

on the job, they are not only trained to improve their cooking skills, but also their life skills. In an interview with Podcast radio host, Kahi describes the first challenges are actually getting the chefs to the kitchen. Without the knowledge of Google maps, the subway or other transportation tools, the new chefs find it very difficult to navigate their new city. Kahi and her team ensure that they give these women basic New York life skills in order to maximize their agency and independence. The women who begin at *Eat Offbeat* generally have three things in common; they are passionate about home cooking, they do not have much experience in a commercial kitchen and they speak minimal English. With the help of the team, such as Michelin-starred experienced Juan Suarez de Lezo, they are trained to refine their cooking skills for a commercial context.

Their effectiveness as both a business and as an organization may come from their ability to cater to refugee women's specific needs. According to research conducted on refugee community organizations, gender-based organizations are more effective than nationality-based ones because of their sensitiveness to gender-based persecutions.<sup>52</sup>

In a report, the British Council suggests that "social enterprise is an under-utilized source of funding for gender equality" as only 29% of women's rights organizations rely on income generating projects. Yet, the results of social-enterprises on women's well-being are immense. 75% of women admitted that their involvement led to an increase in self-worth, and 56% felt like they were now more able to make their own choices.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Griffiths, David . *Refugee community organizations and dispersal: Networks, Resources and Social Capital*<sup>[1]</sup>. Policy Press at the University of Bristol, 2005.

<sup>53</sup> *Activist to entrepreneur: the role of social enterprise in supporting women's empowerment* . The British Council , 2017, *Activist to entrepreneur: the role of social enterprise in supporting women's empowerment* , [www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/social\\_enterprise\\_and\\_womens\\_empowerment\\_july.pdf](http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/social_enterprise_and_womens_empowerment_july.pdf).

In this case, the business nature of the company is changing the roles of these women both within their own family and their society. Their employment at *Eat Offbeat* is considered normal, where they are treated as fair employees and are paid a standard salary. Their ability to contribute to the global foodie trend through their skills and innovation elevates their status from a ‘woman cooking for her family’ to a ‘chef cooking for New York clients’. Like any good restaurant, these women are being applauded individually for their work. Forbes’ highlights some of their best dishes by mentioning Chef Nasrin from Iran as “the mastermind behind the outstanding sour cherry pistachio rice and Chicken Fesenjan”<sup>54</sup> and recounting Chef Rachana’s delicious Nepali cauliflower fritters. The agency that they gain from being an employee of an increasingly successful start-up in New York City and the recognition they are getting from their work, helps them define their new paths.

*Newcomer Kitchen*, based in Toronto, Canada, is another type of food delivery service that focuses on refugee women in the community. Unlike *Eat Offbeat*, they are not as focused on being run like a business. Instead, they invite newly-arrived Syrian women in their kitchen once a week, to cook, connect and sell their food through their delivery system. Their main objective, as Cara Benjamin-Pace describes, is “not to train these women into line workers in the food industry. Our goal is to bring them together and celebrate them as women in the community”<sup>55</sup>. Every Thursday, a number of them come to their centrally located kitchen space, where they prepare dishes to be sold online for pickup or delivery. The proceeds from their sales are shared amongst them. This

<sup>54</sup> Roberts, Nina. “Feeding Kickstarter, Estée Lauder And Google, Refugee Chefs Fuel Catering Startup Eat Offbeat.” *Forbes Magazine*, 16 Oct. 2017, [www.forbes.com/](http://www.forbes.com/)

<sup>55</sup> “Newcomer Kitchen.” *The Depanneur*, [thedepanneur.ca/newcomerkitchen/](http://thedepanneur.ca/newcomerkitchen/).

approach of creating a community for refugees is very different to that of *Eat Offbeat*. The venture began when *Depanneur Kitchen* offered their cooking space to a group of Syrian refugee women whilst they lived in temporary hotels with their families. As they each found more long-term housing, this kitchen went from being a basic necessity to a business. A lot of *Newcomer's Kitchen's* success comes the community it has created for these women. In a Huffington Post video, one of the women admits that “being surrounded by these Syrian women makes me happy.”<sup>56</sup> Having been used to living, cooking and doing daily activities surrounded by family members and friends, this space imitates some of these past experiences. “This reminds me of my country, my parents, my neighbors because we used to do that in my country.”<sup>57</sup>

### Mental Health

Additionally, being in the presence of women who have had similarly challenging experiences of leaving their homes and resettling in a new country, creates a supportive environment for mental health discussion. From war trauma, to the stress of resettlement and adjustment, it is very common to see negative mental health symptoms, especially amongst refugee women. The UNHCR suggests that “the most prevalent and most significant clinical problems among Syrians are emotional disorders, such as: depression, prolonged grief disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder and various forms of anxiety

<sup>56</sup> Lau, Andree. *HuffPost Canada*, 11 July 2016, [www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/07/11/newcomer-kitchen-syrian-refugees-toronto-depanneur\\_n\\_10284400.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/07/11/newcomer-kitchen-syrian-refugees-toronto-depanneur_n_10284400.html).

<sup>57</sup> Lau, Andree. *HuffPost Canada*, 11 July 2016, [www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/07/11/newcomer-kitchen-syrian-refugees-toronto-depanneur\\_n\\_10284400.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/07/11/newcomer-kitchen-syrian-refugees-toronto-depanneur_n_10284400.html).

disorders”.<sup>58</sup> Women as well as children are the most susceptible to mental health issues due to their vulnerability to gender-based, domestic, and sexual violence. One cannot understate the importance of addressing mental health when addressing refugee and women issues. According to research done about refugee mothering and mental health, health interventions should “focus on fostering a supportive community and connections with others to allow for support systems”.<sup>59</sup>

Creating an inclusive space for women resolves certain issues of confidentiality, safety and comfort. *Newcomer Kitchen*, provides a space and time for women to come together, cook, enjoy each other’s’ company, whilst also making money.

It is “cooking and healing at the same time”<sup>60</sup> admits one of the women from *Newcomer Kitchen*. The act of creating a familiar dish, in a somewhat familiar context, helps them open up and share their stories. “After the crisis, they [the women] have a lot of bad stories”<sup>61</sup>, but the process of cooking together for the community serves as a form of overcoming this trauma, and regaining a sense of community which they have lost. Syrian women have generally used their prayers and their social networks as mechanisms for coping.<sup>62</sup> Not only do they share their issues with their friends and family, but use this

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58 Hassan, G. “Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of Syrians affected by armed conflict.” *UNHCR: Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*, vol. 25, no. 02, Jan. 2015, pp. 129–141. 15

59 PARSONS, JACQUELINE CICCIO, et al. “Refugee Mothering, Resettlement and Mental Health.” *Mothers Under Fire: Mothering in Conflict Areas*, edited by Tatjana Takševa and Arlene Sgoutas, Demeter Press, Bradford, ON, 2015, *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1lrd951.16](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1lrd951.16). 241

60 Lau, Andree. *HuffPost Canada*, 11 July 2016, [www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/07/11/newcomer-kitchen-syrian-refugees-toronto-depanneur\\_n\\_10284400.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/07/11/newcomer-kitchen-syrian-refugees-toronto-depanneur_n_10284400.html).

61 *Bring Me*, Buzzfeed, June 2017, [www.facebook.com/buzzfeedbringme/videos/1641075879260567/](https://www.facebook.com/buzzfeedbringme/videos/1641075879260567/).

62 Hassan, G. “Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of Syrians affected by armed conflict.” *UNHCR: Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*, vol. 25, no. 02, Jan. 2015, pp. 129–141. 17

energy to organize charity events, support groups and bazaars. Similarly to the women in *Newcomer Kitchen*, they enjoy keeping themselves busy by leaving home to work together on various projects. This food enterprise harnesses the energy, need for community and coping mechanisms of Syrian women to



Figure 4: Yawar, Manhoor . *Newcomer Kitchen* project gives Syrian refugees a taste of home in Toronto. Toronto, Nov. 2016.

both create new narratives around Syrian culture and to help them profit from their incredible cooking skills. By helping them actively cope with issues and reinforce their social networks, food enterprises may potentially have even more long-term success than mental health institutions for refugee women.

*Newcomer's Kitchen* can easily be interpreted as an organization that simply reaffirms women's roles as bearers of culture, and food-makers, limited to the confines of the home and kitchen. The women-only environment of a kitchen, and the act of cooking for their families or for the community as a collective, resembles their experiences back home in Syria. The idea that the organization "celebrates that they hold the ancient knowledge of one of the oldest cuisines in the world"<sup>63</sup> may be perceived as a method to ensure that they do not lose sight of their 'supposed' roles as women. That being said,

<sup>63</sup> "Newcomer Kitchen." *The Depanneur*, [thedepanneur.ca/newcomerkitchen/](http://thedepanneur.ca/newcomerkitchen/).

this creation of community based around food and culture may act to appease the negative misconception unfairly attributed to them.

Creating spaces for refugee women within the sphere of food entrepreneurship has both shown to be a way for them to break away from their previous traditional roles, and as a way of enforcing them. What remains consistent, is the agency it gives them to choose their desired functions. While they may still be bound by certain norms, their involvement with food entrepreneurship gives them a chance to transfer their traditional cooking skills, to a less-traditional public space. As Ahmed points out, “by being creators of their own role, devoid from having to fit into an established community norm, they could be as creative as they wanted to be, and choose only aspects of their culture that they found favourable.”<sup>64</sup> In the case of *Eat Offbeat* and *Newcomer’s Kitchen*, we see women choosing to amplify their roles as cooks for business-related reasons, and for the benefit of their own mental health.

“I’m really happy here. And the best part is getting to know you [Manal] and the others. I really feel like I’m with family”<sup>65</sup> says Chef Dhuha from Iraq. In an interview, she reveals that life was difficult when she first came to the States with her two kids in 2013. “I didn’t know English.... I didn’t know how to use the subway. Then I met Minal”.<sup>66</sup>

We also see the formation of what one might define as a collective enterprise. These women are transforming their traditional role of creators of culture in a private sphere, to the public sphere. By coming together, sharing their experiences and their

<sup>64</sup> Nilufar Ahmed 104

<sup>65</sup> Sola, Katie. “Inside Eat Offbeat, The Refugee-Run Kitchen That’s Satisfying Adventurous Eaters With A Taste For Social Good.” *Forbes*, 22 Aug. 2016, [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com).

<sup>66</sup> Brown, Leanne . “The Eat Offbeat Cookbook.” *Leanne Brown*, 7 Mar. 2017, [www.leannebrown.com/eat-offbeat-cookbook/](http://www.leannebrown.com/eat-offbeat-cookbook/).



cooking expertise amongst themselves and with the broader community, they are recreating a narrative of their own. In the case of *Newcomer's Kitchen*, the support the women give each other and get from the local Toronto community has provided them with a platform to increase their social capital. Their commitment to the success of *Newcomer Kitchen* has led to “tremendous support on social media as well as remarkable local, national and international media coverage including NOW, CBC... VICE, Huffington Post, City Lab at the Atlantic” with more than 27,000 website views, 2450 Facebook group members<sup>67</sup>, 1,104 Instagram followers<sup>68</sup> and 209 articles and mentions on news online<sup>69</sup>. So far, the business has provided fifty-five Syrian families with a total revenue of \$53,000<sup>70</sup>, a number that continues to grow weekly. One might measure their impact by looking at what *Newcomer Kitchen* has been able to achieve from their growing popularity. Their website boasts some of their latest achievements including preparing and selling 500+ food items at Luminato Festival, catering a VIP Canada day for Mayor John Tory, holding interactive workshops and catering performances, hosting and raising \$30,000 at a gala fundraiser and co-hosting an interactive ‘Dinner & Dialogue’ with HotChocs Documentary Festival.<sup>71</sup>

Most publicized, however, is the visit of Canadian President Justin Trudeau, after a Syrian roundtable discussion on CBC and their feature on Chevrolet’ Canadian Dream campaign (with over 1.7 million views as of now).<sup>72</sup> . As these women establish

<sup>67</sup> *Newcomer Kitchen: Turning a Crisis into a Community*. *Newcomer Kitchen: Turning a Crisis into a Community*, The Depanneur. [https://thedepanneur.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/NK-one-sheet\\_May\\_2017\\_web.pdf](https://thedepanneur.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/NK-one-sheet_May_2017_web.pdf)

<sup>68</sup> “Newcomer Kitchen.” *Hype Stat*, [thedepanneur.ca/hypestat.com/](http://thedepanneur.ca/hypestat.com/).

<sup>69</sup> “Newcomer Kitchen.” *Google News*, Google, [news.google.com/](http://news.google.com/).

<sup>70</sup> *Newcomer Kitchen: Turning a Crisis Into a Community*. *Newcomer Kitchen: Turning a Crisis Into a Community*, The Depanneur, 2017.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

themselves as members of their community, and raise awareness about being both refugees and women, their quest for integration and acceptance gains momentum. Their presence on both the President's agenda, and on mass media advertising campaigns, further disseminates their story and promotes acknowledgment of their work.

**Mediation of current political events by capturing the interest and movement of resistance against xenophobia.**

A defining characteristic of the refugee food enterprises, as opposed to other types of food businesses, is their resistant nature in the political context of xenophobia. Instead of hiding away from the rise in anti-immigration, they are using the harmful anti-immigration sentiments to their advantage. They are therefore not growing despite, but because of the increased xenophobia.

Capturing Movements of Resistance

Food enterprises use their location, accessibility and influence to act as channels for political resistance. They use the political climate as an instrument of organization to capture the interest of others looking to resist by providing an avenue for local populations to easily and peacefully resist anti-immigration sentiments. Under the prefix of the rise of xenophobia, Islamophobia and populism around the world, the role of these food enterprises is becoming increasingly crucial in mediating and promoting a more

open, global world. In the United States for example, the Trump administration is intensifying the need for culturally inclusive initiatives. Since the inauguration, the administration has capitalized on and legitimized the fear of ‘outsiders’ – especially of Middle Easterners and Muslims, terms they mistakenly interchange. The travel ban first implemented on January 27<sup>th</sup> for example, restricted entry of citizens from seven majority-Muslim countries (Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen) for ninety days<sup>73</sup>. While it continued to be contested and blocked by state and federal judges, it nonetheless promotes the discrimination of individuals based on their nationality and religion.

Since the inauguration in January, *Komeeda*, the supper club movement aimed at bringing people together, has made several changes to their structure. One of the mottos shared on their Facebook page says: “Eat our delicious food before Trump kicks us out”<sup>74</sup>. In an interview with a food politics podcast, the founders of *Komeeda* reveal that *Displaced Kitchen* was born out of travel ban. Jabber Al-Bihani and Nasser Jaber, realized that they wanted to take their business further than just bringing people together through food, but also wanted to actually solve problems through food. They therefore decided to create a more impactful oriented food experience that would provide a platform for a refugee to both cook for and eat with their guests. Their aim is to both humanize and provide funds to refugees as they settle in New York City. The *Displaced Kitchen* series now hosts weekly dinner series for ten people. Half of the \$65 fee goes to the host-refugee while the rest covers the meal’s expenses. The founders aim to start a

<sup>73</sup> Almasry, Steve, and Darran Simon. “A timeline of President Trump's travel bans.” *CNN*, 30 Mar. 2017, [www.cnn.com/2017/02/10/us/trump-travel-ban-timeline/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/10/us/trump-travel-ban-timeline/index.html).

<sup>74</sup> Kamin, Sari. “Komeeda with Jabber Al-Bihani and Nasser Jaber | Heritage ...” *Food Without Borders*, Heritage Radio Network, Sept. 2017, [heritageradionetwork.org/podcast/komeeda-with-jabber-al-bihani-and-nasser-jaber/](http://heritageradionetwork.org/podcast/komeeda-with-jabber-al-bihani-and-nasser-jaber/).

foodie revolution as a byproduct of this project. They understand that the average person may not be involved in grass-roots or social justice movements for reasons other than the lack of care. While people want to engage and support, they are often tied down by their busy schedules and tiring work life. *Displaced Kitchen* hopes to provide them with avenues to get involved that require little time and effort.<sup>75</sup>

Trump's inauguration was not the only formative event for food initiatives in the United States. *Eat Offbeat* was highly impacted by Trump travel ban instigated in January 2017. In an interview, Khali, recounts the day the ban was announced. The team felt vulnerable as immigrants and as a business, in what seems to be an officially racist America. However, in New York City, they felt like people "had their backs". The day it happened, "sales doubled, people wanted to do something"<sup>76</sup> by standing in alliance with refugees. This gave the *Eat Offbeat* team even more determination to continue. Trump's

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

efforts to prevent immigration has in fact been beneficial to both for the business and the movement around it.



Figure 5 Hypestat Alexa Site Traffic Rank, Eat Offbeat. Nov. 2017.

According to Amazon's Alexa analytics, *Eat Offbeat's* website received significantly more views during the month of January 2017.<sup>77</sup> The graph is created to identify a website's traffic in relation to other popular websites. The smaller the y-axis, the higher ranking in terms of the website views. There are big increases during early and late January, correspond to the period of Trump's inauguration and his signing of the executive order for the travel ban.

Whilst the graph suggests a plunging decline after February, the company's sales have sustained, with a customer-base that repeatedly proclaims their support for the business as a way for them to feel involved in the resistance. The *Eat Offbeat* website still enjoys 250 daily unique visitors. Not to mention, approximately 104 features from web news sites around the world.<sup>78</sup> The types of clients *Eat Offbeat* is also a testament to the

<sup>77</sup> "Eat Offbeat." *Hype Stat*, eatoffbeat.com.hypestat.com/.

<sup>78</sup> "Eat Offbeat." *Google News*, www.google.com/search?q=%22eatoffbeat%22&tbm=nws&ei=CnP\_WdOwKMTUjwOvyI\_ADg&start=0&sa=N&biw=1501&bih=740&dpr=0.9.

type of resistance they are sustaining. Apart from individuals looking to host a dinner party, their clients range from Google and Estée Lauder, to the Red Cross, Columbia University and NYU.<sup>79</sup> By choosing *Eat Offbeat* as their caterer of choice for office lunches and events, these large, influential companies are able to show their own form of resistance against xenophobia by simply ordering their food and feeding their clients and employees with it. This might also be a public relations move intended to highlight their corporate social responsibility in the face of the public, to impress their clients, their stakeholders and the audience they are targeting.

*Eat Offbeat*, like other refugee-based food enterprises may benefit from people's need for low-cost activism, due to their accessible and necessary roles as food sources. Some might believe this falls under the umbrella of 'slacktivism' or 'token support', a term coined to describe activities that do not require much participation from their target audience.<sup>80</sup> A recent analysis on the nature of slacktivism argues the benefits of low primary involvement as "consumers exhibit greater helping on a subsequent, more meaningful task after providing an initial private display of token support for a cause".<sup>81</sup> While the data for has not been released about how 'followers', 'likers' and fans of these

<sup>79</sup> Roberts, Nina. "Feeding Kickstarter, Estée Lauder And Google, Refugee Chefs Fuel Catering Startup Eat Offbeat." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 16 Oct. 2017, [www.forbes.com/sites/ninaroberts/2017/10/13/feeding-kickstarter-estee-lauder-and-google-refugee-chefs-fuel-catering-startup-eat-offbeat/](http://www.forbes.com/sites/ninaroberts/2017/10/13/feeding-kickstarter-estee-lauder-and-google-refugee-chefs-fuel-catering-startup-eat-offbeat/).

<sup>80</sup> Seay, Laura. "Does slacktivism work?" *The Washington Post*, 12 Mar. 2014, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/12/does-slacktivism-work/?utm\\_term=.e5c70adec610](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/12/does-slacktivism-work/?utm_term=.e5c70adec610).

<sup>81</sup> Kristofferson, Kirk, et al. "The Nature of Slacktivism: How the Social Observability of an Initial Act of Token Support Affects Subsequent Prosocial Action." *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 40, no. 6, 2014, pp. 1149–1166. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/674137](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/674137).

food organizations act after encountering the food and the refugees, this concept of 'slacktivism' might increase their involvement with refugee issues in the long run.

Unfortunately, the United States is not the only country that is generating xenophobic narratives against migrants, refugees and nationals perceived as 'others'. In the last few years, France has seen the rise of the far-right through the popularity of Marie Le Pen, and the growing anti-Muslims and anti-Middle Eastern sentiments expressed in all segments of society. In 2015 and 2016, a total of 2.5 million people applied for asylum in the European Union.<sup>82</sup> At the same time, we are seeing a sharp rise in anti-migrant violence, especially in places with large incoming groups of refugees. In 2015, 1.1 million refugees arrived in Germany<sup>83</sup>. Between 2014 and 2016, violence against the newly settled multiplied by almost twenty times. In its latest figures, Germany recorded there were more than 3,500 attacks against refugees, migrants and their shelters, amounting to almost 10 a day.<sup>84</sup>

Despite the back-drop of anti refugee sentiments growing in Europe, *Refugee Food Festival* has grown from being a Paris-based initiative only, to featuring in 13 different cities. This citizen initiative is able to work through its partnership with the well-established United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to establish legitimacy, structure and a good network. In their kit, the *Refugee Food Festival* founders explain the important role that the NGO plays in the organization of each event. Members of the UNHCR use their expertise and experience to assist the local organizers. Not only

<sup>82</sup> "EU migrant crisis: facts and figures ." *European Parliament*, June 2017, [www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20170629STO78630/eu-migrant-crisis-facts-and-figures](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20170629STO78630/eu-migrant-crisis-facts-and-figures).

<sup>83</sup> Katz, Bruce. "Cities and refugees: The German experience." *Brooking Institution* , [www.brookings.edu/research/cities-and-refugees-the-german-experience/](http://www.brookings.edu/research/cities-and-refugees-the-german-experience/).

<sup>84</sup> "10 attacks a day' against refugees, shelters in 2016." *Al Jazeera*, 26 Feb. 2017, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/attacks-day-refugees-shelters-2016-170226170920171.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/attacks-day-refugees-shelters-2016-170226170920171.html).

do they act as facilitators between the organizers, and the host city, but they also offer training to the project holders to clarify the context, legal framework and current refugee issues. The NGO ensures that the festival corresponds to its main mission “to safeguard the rights and well-being of people who have been forced to flee” by ensuring that everybody “has the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another country.” Lastly, they aim to “secure lasting solutions”.<sup>85</sup> Because of the festival only started in 2016, the long-term impacts of the festival have yet to be determined. That being said, the first iteration of the project in Paris saw an immediate interest by both public and private organizations to hire refugee chefs for their events. From the distinguished Quai Branly Museum to ‘La fête de L’humanité’ (a 600,000 people festival), large companies are collaborating with Refugee Food Festival chefs to design culinary experiences across the city.<sup>86</sup>

The food festival therefore leverages its partnership with the UNHCR to magnify the voice and talent of their refugee chefs, and the refugees around the world.

The previous examples highlight the ways in which xenophobic policies and actions have successfully rallied people to support refugees through these food organizations. Trump’s inauguration and his attempt to implement a travel ban have had a pivotal impact on both *Displaced Kitchen* and *Eat Offbeat*. In fact, *Displaced Kitchen* was born out of Trump’s election. Its founders were fueled by the increased hatred and racism in the country to create a food movement based on creating relations between a refugee chef and their New York customers. *Eat Offbeat* found strength in the support of

<sup>85</sup> Martin, Louis. *Refugee Food Festival Kit*. *Refugee Food Festival Kit*, Food Sweet Food and UNHCR.

<sup>86</sup> Schmitt, Céline. “How Paris is supporting refugee integration through an innovative food festival.” *UNHCR Innovation*, 14 July 2017, [www.unhcr.org/innovation/paris-supporting-refugee-integration-innovative-food-festival/](http://www.unhcr.org/innovation/paris-supporting-refugee-integration-innovative-food-festival/).



those who opposed the administration's anti-immigration agenda. Similarly, Refugee Food Festival, has found much support amongst local chefs and restaurant-goers across Europe looking to lend a hand in the face of far-right backlash. Interestingly, none of these organizations have shown to outwardly express their opinion on specific political events; perhaps a method to remain 'neutral', and avoid backlash from certain groups. That being said, one cannot overlook the political statements they express through the chefs they hire, the food they make, the organizations they associate themselves with and the media buzz they obtain. These organizations both act as resisters, and as vehicles for resistance against harmful extreme-right beliefs.

It is also important, however, to consider how these enterprises might compromise their goals in the context of this negative political backlash. As a way of resisting anti-immigration reactions, the companies may overcompensate by trying to 'prove' that Syrian refugees are willing and able to assimilate into their new societies. The fear of highlighting the 'otherness' of Syrian way life (including eating habits) may result in overcompensation in catering to Western-style preferences and perceptions. In the *Refugee Food Festival* for example, the refugee chefs are given the chance to work in the kitchen of a local chef for a day. In order to be successful, they must both showcase their traditional cuisine, while also catering to the expectations of the public. In France for example, the chefs must adhere to the norms of cuisine in French context. Damascus-born Mohammad el Khaldy with twenty years of experience under his belt, joined a French Bistro named L'Ami Jean during the first rendition of *Refugee Food Festival*.

“We are making a taste that is from Syria, but in the French style” Khaldy said in an interview.<sup>87</sup> This was widely praised by most of the restaurant’s usual clientele.

The social and political context requires the refugee chefs to adapt their local cooking methods, presentation and service to suit their audience. *Eat Offbeat* places its dishes within categories of the Western imagination of the orient. From Nepal to Eritrea, Iran and Syria, the food enterprise has umbrellaed its dishes under a signifier of fables and fantasy. In the case of the *Refugee Food Festival*, refugee chefs are required to adapt to their new kitchens based on the tastes of the local community and the leniency of the chef whose kitchen they use. It becomes apparent that othered cuisines only become digestible (literally) when it is set in the context of familiarity, either portrayed as a well-known mystical story or if it is altered to local tastes.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, there has been a tremendous growth of food enterprises connected to refugee issues in the last few years. Now, more than ever, we are seeing the use of Syrian refugee cooking skills, entrepreneurial inclination and drive to create a better life for themselves through the means of food.

The growth of these smaller organizations, often supported by multinational NGOs, has provided valuable grass-root changes in the face of the Syrian refugee crisis. For certain refugees, these food initiatives provide them with work opportunities, new skills, new communities, and a gateway for them to share their stories. At the same time,

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<sup>87</sup> Rubin, Alissa J. “From Refugee Chefs, a Taste of Home.” *The New York Times*, 5 July 2016, [www.nytimes.com/2016/07/06/dining/refugees-chefs-paris.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/06/dining/refugees-chefs-paris.html).

the organizations are creating platforms for host societies to interact, learn and benefit from the arrival of these new communities.

The growing anti-immigration sentiments and publically accepted xenophobia, have had significant impact on the nature of these enterprises. This study shows that in fact, the growth of refugee food entrepreneurship and the growth of racism in the west are not completely separate. Instead, the creation, rally and support behind these movements is fueled by the increasingly visible xenophobia in countries such as the United States and France. These food enterprises have found strength in a determination to fight back. They have done so by creating alternative narratives of the Syrian refugee crisis and by capturing the interest of others looking to support refugees and resist negative stereotypes.

The nature of these food enterprises can be understood through their three main roles in:

1. Countering the perception that Syrians are vulnerable, tragic asylum seekers needing to be rescued
2. Contesting the stereotype of Middle Eastern immigrants as misogynistic
3. Mediating political events by capturing movements of resistance against xenophobia.

The food enterprises construct a narrative that goes beyond the mainstream portrayal of refugees as charity by presenting them valuable contributors to society. Not only can

they meet the demands expected of them, but provide value through their cooking. The women of *Eat Offbeat* are bringing ‘real’ hummus to hungry New Yorkers while the chefs at *Foodhini* use customized pamphlets to assist their customers. Additionally, these initiatives counter misconceptions of Middle Eastern immigrants by creating a space that shifts the power back to refugee women. By taking on jobs as chefs, they push beyond their traditional roles (defined by their culture and environment) and create an important healing community to surround them. To date, women at *Newcomer Kitchen* have served 4000 meals, earned \$53,000, all while facilitating understanding between Syrian and Canadian communities in Toronto. Finally, the organizations are shown to continuously evolve in their mediation of the current political climate. Because of the communal properties of food, the boom of the ‘foodie’ and the fear the growing xenophobia in the West, food entrepreneurship is able to transform ugly anti-immigrant realities, into opportunities. *Refugee Food Festival* and *Displaced Kitchen*, for instance, have learned to ‘embrace’ the pushback against refugees to amplify their resistance, boost their business and make a difference.

As I make my concluding remarks, it is also important to address certain limitations of this study. One of which is the broad scope used to define the West. This analysis assumed that all literature and evidence extracted about the U.S., U.K., France and Germany was applicable to one another. Whilst they are very similar in their institutions and values, their cultural differences should be more acknowledged when making assumptions about the way they react to Syrian immigration, xenophobia, foodie culture etc... Additionally, this analysis was not able to provide direct evidence and statistics of how food entrepreneurship is able to concretely impact refugee lives, especially in the

political sense. Because these organizations are still quite young, there has been little evidence of direct dialogue with political institutions. Perhaps, as times goes on, one might see these social enterprises achieve more influence on political decisions concerning refugees. In the meantime, one must continue to observe the nature of these organizations and track the impacts they are having on both refugees and their environment. Especially when the environment is hostile towards outsiders.

Xenophobic sentiments create a wall around prosperous countries and leave the most vulnerable to suffer at its gate. Rather than serving as a weapon, food has the potential of acting as a peace-maker and as bridge between them both. Food is slowly becoming a movement, an avenue for social change around the world. As food businesses continue to develop and gain recognition, their influence over the official discourse surrounding Syrian refugees will grow. If we are to change the way refugee migration is perceived, perhaps food is the key.

*“Cooking is a language through which society expresses itself. For man knows that the food he ingests in order to live will become assimilated into his being, will become himself. There must be, therefore, a relationship between the ideas he has formed of a specific items of food and the image he has of himself and his place in the universe”<sup>88</sup>*

In Stephen Steinberg’s belief that our perception of food is indicative of our own self, his argument can be translated to how we form our perception of others. If refugee

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<sup>88</sup> Steinberg, Stephen. *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity and Class in America*. Beacon Press, 1981. 64

food enterprises can help others form ideas about Syrian food, they may create new perceptions of the refugees.

Food is both secular and highly political. It is consumed for hunger, it is desired for satisfaction and delight. Food is created by culture and altered by environment. Food is needed, enjoyed and highly revered. Perhaps one day its influence over the human body and mind will be translated into actions of pure good.