

5 Food from Home and Food from Here: Disassembling Locality in Local Food Systems with Refugees and Immigrants in Anchorage, Alaska

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Introduction

Sitting at an English-language school in Anchorage, Alaska, a middle-aged Angolan woman called Nattat¹ distinguished the multifaceted meanings of “local food.” Local food in Angola is “food from home,” whereas local food in Anchorage is “food from here.” Her definitions contrasted the mainstream understanding of “local”² that I came to query in Anchorage, where the Alaskan government has mobilized to increase in-state food production in order to address the state’s food security challenges. For Nattat, her foodscape is constructed through these distinctions of familiarity and unfamiliarity. She practices these distinctions through her desire to try local foods in Alaska and by interchanging traditional Angolan flavors for more commonly found ingredients to make fufu. Fufu, a pastelike corn flour dish widespread in Africa, is her favorite dish from home. In one sense, Nattat’s fufu utilizes ingredients that evoke a familiarity with her home in Angola. She associates local food with the connection between fufu and Angola and her home. However, when describing how she makes fufu in the United States, she said, “You can find the corn flour here. It’s actually the Spanish version, which is the maize flour that the Spanish people use and that’s what I use.” When I asked if the taste compares to eating it at home in Angola, she said, “No, not really. But it’s edible,” identifying unfamiliarity in the ingredients disassociated from home.

Nattat’s retelling of making fufu demonstrates her distinction of food from here and food from home. While she can’t find all the ingredients to make fufu in Alaska, she reassembles the recipe with food from here in order to try and make a dish that is comforting and familiar in an unfamiliar

place. These re-creations of familiarity are reassembled through the global movement of foods and recipes from her home country to Anchorage. Komarnisky (2009) terms this a *foodscape*, where food plays the dual role of being connected to a place and connecting places. This dual role of food is important in understanding how “local foods” create an invisible barrier to participation and comfort in the daily food practices of a growing population of immigrants and refugees residing in Anchorage, Alaska.

Conversations about “local food” within race, class, and nutrition inequalities suggest that food systems require understanding the experiences and categories of belonging that can inadvertently exclude immigrant and refugee communities. Since the rise of the term “local food” in the first decade of this century, in movies like Robert Kenner’s *Food, Inc.* (2009), popular books like Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006), and quick industry usage in marketing, it has been dominated by imagery of food sourcing within state borders or predefined spatial or geographic boundaries. “Local food” has come to be associated with increased traceability, quality of food, and trust in exchanges between producer and consumer (Hinrichs 2015). While these values benefit overall environmental health and community health, the rhetoric of “local” as a specific distance mobilizes notions of food locality that perpetuate a specific white imaginary around food systems (Guthman 2008a). The alternative food discourses that are supported in farmers markets and “local food” systems disregard subjects and communities that utilize practices not yet recognized by dominant narratives within local food movements. Purchasing and cooking practices are further marginalized through race and class inequalities in health and nutritional access (Slocum 2006; Drewnowski and Specter 2004; Pothukuchi and Kaufman 1999) and land resource access in urban food systems (White 2011a, 2011b) and urban food justice movements (Loo 2014; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010). While outside the legal legitimation that occurs in “agricultural racial formations” or the everyday experiences of racial exclusions and “othering” (Minkoff-Zern et al. 2011), I argue that a local food movement similarly constitutes an acceptable type of local food that makes visible subjects of those who participate in purchasing and consuming local foods grown within a specific geographical distance.

Nattat’s dual meaning of “local food” shows what is lost when neglecting diverse understandings and practices of local food. The established use of the term creates a binary of acceptable and unacceptable food consumers,

segregating those who do not or cannot support local food (DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Valiente-Neighbours 2012). I use ethnographic cases of immigrants' and refugees' experiences to show the limits of local food movements mobilized in the popularity of farmers markets, community-supported agriculture programs, the US Department of Agriculture's defining of local and regional food systems, and the sourcing of local foods by large food retailers in Alaska (Hinrichs 2015). Immigrants and refugees challenge the concept of "local" in the food movement and push sustainable and local food systems³ to better consider the migration of foods and peoples. Excluding how foods and peoples move becomes especially harmful when discourses of cultural foodways are minimized in sociopolitical decision making regarding what counts as local food and what it means to participate in growing local food.

To complicate the local food concept (Hinrichs 2015, 2003; Ostrom 2006) within the reality of the local-global interplay of cultural identity and the creation of local diets (Ohnuki-Tierney 1994; Watson and Caldwell 2005), scholars offer solutions for a deeper cross-cultural understanding of the unique needs and contributions of immigrant communities. These solutions take into account how food is utilized in "longing for home" and the "painful struggle to accommodate to new ways of being in the world" when placed within the context of Michael Pollan's "food rules" (Pollan 2008; Mares 2012, 335). Nattat's description at the start of this chapter of local food as food from home and food from here encapsulates how these shifts in purchasing and cooking practices to accommodate unfamiliar ingredients requires that localness not be static or monolithic but move beyond spatial boundedness toward relationality, contextuality, and translocalism (Appadurai 1996; Komarnisky 2009). I utilize the definition of translocality, building from the work of Holtzman (2006), Choo (2007), and Conradson and McKay (2007), to describe the relationship between food and people in the process of ongoing emplacement, commitments to families and communities, and emotional and material affiliations. Nattat's story is only one example of how food can express familiarity and unfamiliarity, where "the absence of familiar material culture, and its subtle evocations of home, is surely one of the most profound dislocations of transnational migration" (Law 2001, 277). This ethnographic project details how unfamiliarity exists in different modes for immigrants and refugees navigating the multiple layers of nonbelonging created through "local food" systems.

Food becomes the material object for reflection on the arrangements of power that allow for the inclusion and exclusion of peoples. It acts as a symbol of belonging to a food movement or recognition of how cultures establish a local food system not represented by the dominant food movements (Alkon and Vang 2016; Mintz 1985; Law 2001). This chapter aims to create greater understanding of how immigrant and refugee communities understand their roles in local food production while adapting familiarities of foodscapes from their home countries to Anchorage, Alaska.

Researching Transnationalities in Anchorage, Alaska

This chapter is based on ethnographic research conducted with immigrants representing 19 countries and refugee farmers from Bhutan residing in Anchorage, Alaska, in summer 2015. Given its geographic location, Alaska is not widely recognized for its immigrant and refugee communities, but it has recently gained press coverage in state and national newscasters' and academic scholars' reporting of Anchorage's diversity (Saleeby 2010; Jessen 2011; O'Malley 2015; Allen-Young 2014). Among Alaska's growing immigrant population, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders made up the fastest-growing communities, increasing by 73% between 1990 and 2000. And the Latino/a community saw substantial growth of 45.2% in that same time frame (Bibbs 2006). In addition, refugees began arriving in Alaska in the early 1980s and have been supported by Catholic Social Services' Refugee Assistance and Immigration Service, a state and federally funded resettlement program in Alaska (Saleeby 2010; Tsong 2004).

Since the 1970s, Alaska has been addressing food security through sustainable agricultural systems given Alaska's precarious geographic and political location, caught between government protection of resource extraction, subsistence hunting shortages, and environmental uncertainties resulting from record high temperatures in both summer and winter (Hodges Snyder and Meter 2015; Stevenson et al. 2014). Alaska's food security is addressed through programs and research conducted by community food organizations, government agencies, academics, cooperative extension agents, and the Alaska Food Policy Council (Stevenson et al. 2014). These models for addressing food security would benefit from an understanding of how diverse peoples participate within these parts of Alaska's food system.

To explore these questions about inclusion of a growing immigrant and refugee community in Anchorage's local food movement, I utilized participant observation and semistructured interviews at various sites across Anchorage in summer 2015, including community gardens, farmers markets, English-language centers, and refugee assistance program sites. To recruit participants, I relied on connections with local organizations, including a farm-to-market program and an English-language center. These two sites were essential in connecting with participants and providing sites at which to conduct participant observation in spaces directly related to the area's local food scene. Through semistructured interviews, my goal was to better understand the nuances of lived experiences as an immigrant or refugee in gaining access to food needs and desires, participation in local food practices, and understanding of how local food differs between their home countries and Anchorage. I asked questions to compare experiences between their home country and Anchorage regarding access to foods, food practices, "good foods," and "local foods." I interviewed 20 people, 14 women and 6 men, who have lived in the United States between three months and 38 years. Of these participants, seven people work in food-related jobs at farmers markets, grocery stores, or restaurants.

In this chapter, I first situate Anchorage, Alaska, as an important site for exploring current trends in urban food systems. I then examine how refugee farmers from the Growing Community Gardens (GCG) program and other immigrant residents understand what it means to be part of a "local food" system. I close with the challenges and opportunities through which food scholars, food movement participants, and policymakers can better connect meanings of locality, as food from here and food from home, to create a local food system accessible to immigrants and refugees living in urban spaces.

Constructing Food Landscapes and Connecting Alaska

Alaska's long histories of a locally producing agricultural sector (Davies 2007; Francis 1967; Lewis and Pearson 1990) and subsistence-based Alaska Native cultures (Loring and Gerlach 2009; Lee 2003, 2002; Kancewick and Smith 1991) set the context for Alaska's diverse food system guided by state laws, federal laws, and food development programs. After the US government

purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867, Congress passed the Homestead Act of 1898 to set up experimental agricultural stations throughout the state, build agricultural infrastructure, and move a workforce of 202 families from the Lower 48 states to generate Alaska's agricultural industry (Davies 2007; Haycox 2002). With the economic downturn leading into the Great Depression, providing food for the state's population became a priority. Federal policymakers provided moving costs and supplies to families transplanted from the Midwest into preconstructed barns and houses to farm north of Anchorage-Matanuska Valley (Meter and Phillips Goldenberg 2014). This access to farmland and agricultural development from the government started a history of family farms, homesteaders, and land-use practices that later influenced today's food system meant to sustain the state's food sufficiency and supply Anchorage markets.

Food security in Alaska, as defined by Loring and Gerlach (2009, involves a food system that supports biophysical, social, and ecological health, yet continues to be strained by fluctuations in oil prices and global costs of food (Meter and Phillips Goldenberg 2014). In order to address these strains, Meter and Phillips Goldenberg (2014) suggest that Alaska's future food system must be fueled through local resources and a renewed interest and investment in local capacity building or residents' food access may suffer from the scarcity and rising costs of fossil fuels. However, Alaska's food system is currently reliant on energy-intensive imported food and climatic changes that have the potential to strain 95% of the food that Alaskans purchase from out of state (Alaska Cooperative Extension Service 2006; Meter and Phillips Goldenberg 2014). The state's strategy to localize Alaska's food system, defined as in-state production, is to reduce the amount of food imported from the Lower 48 states by developing small-farm, greenhouse, and aquaculture production.

The Alaska Department of Natural Resources (2013) developed the Alaska Grown labeling campaign to promote the production and consumption of food grown within the state. This project stems from the US Department of Agriculture's definition of "local food" as "marketing of food to consumers produced and distributed in a limited geographic area" (USDA 2016). This model does not explicitly assign a specific distance to the term "local" but still aligns with dominant definitions of locality, effectively limiting perceptions of the local to a confined space within Alaska and belonging to Alaska. As this research investigates how Alaska's residents take part in

local food system programming where food is grown within the state, it becomes clear that this limited perception of “local food” ostracizes the cultural histories and traditions that Alaska’s residents participate in and actively construct.

Navigating the Familiar and Unfamiliar

Fatima fumbled with the large bundle of keys in her hand as she sat across from me in the lobby on the University of Alaska—Anchorage’s campus. “In America, for me, I have to shop like either twice a week or once a week ‘cause of the work schedule, my three children, and the stores are bigger. I have to jump from store to store to find what I want to cook. [In Jordan], we don’t have to worry about it, even if you work, you just walk by the store and pick up what you’re gonna cook” (interview, August 7, 2015). Her discomfort is visible in her body language, and the keys still shifting in her hand amplify her discomfort in having to shop for food in a food system unfamiliar to her. Here, she is describing two places. One place is *home*, a foodscape that was built for the types of foods that she recognizes and can easily find. Another place is *here*, a foodscape that is not recognizable to her and results in the invisible discomforts that marginalize her food decision making.

Fatima describes how to make beef and rice stews or couscous and grilled chicken down to the spices in each dish. Her description of these processes builds a menu of foods that she describes as local food in Jordan. Locality, as Fatima distinguishes it, is defined as the dishes frequently served in homes in Jordan, dishes that she knows well enough to be able to provide me with a step-by-step process for preparing them. But when asked to define “local” in Alaska, she stuttered and searchingly said, “I don’t think there is anything local. Mmmm local I think...when you say local I think the things that grow up in Anchorage, or Alaska” (interview, August 8, 2015). In her unfamiliarity with Alaska, she assumes that local foods are those that are produced within the state, disassociated from the foods cooked in people’s houses or the relationality of food sharing she associates with Jordan’s local foods. While her definition of local food aligns with the Alaska Grown definition, she points to an important distinction: that local food is food from a place that evokes a sense of familiarity and home. Fatima embodies these distinctions of local food through her discomfort in talking about grocery shopping in Alaska and her ease in talking about shopping in Jordan. She

describes shopping at a halal store on Mountain View Drive in Anchorage: “Even though it’s like an African store, [the storeowners] have items that have Arabic writing. If it has English and Arabic writing, I know what it is. But some of them have their own language or [the storeowners] tell you, ‘I don’t know what this is, how do you guys use this?’” (interview, August 7, 2015). She is able to navigate different shops to find familiar foods to create the local Jordanian dishes in her home in Alaska. But more importantly, her desire to be able to find familiarity through local foods, as food from home, showcases the type of exclusion that creates discomfort in a place or emphasizes an inability to perform certain food purchasing or consumption practices (Slocum 2007). By seeking the familiar through various ingredients found in stores throughout Anchorage, Fatima must navigate barriers of unfamiliarity that exclude her from Anchorage’s food system and the types of foods that count as local in Alaska and in Jordan.

These landscapes of invisible barriers to access are expressed in locations of large-box grocery stores like Fred Meyer or Carr’s. Carlos, a middle-aged Colombian man, describes how these stores differ in accessibility of foods based on the neighborhood where they are located. He gave the example of the Penland Park Carr’s, which although considered a large-box grocery store sells nopanelles and yucca, produce that he says you cannot find in other Carr’s stores or other large-box grocery stores:

Then if you go three miles into Midtown and shop at the Midtown Carr’s, like in the very center of the Sears mall, that one will have almost nothing compared to the Penland Park one. It won’t even seem like the same store. You’ll have like your apples, your oranges, but you’re not going to find that much of a variety in the ethnic foods. And it gets even weirder when you go down Northern Lights heading west maybe another 1.4 mile[s] away to Carr’s Aurora Village, where that one is really, it’s like maybe a yuppie food store. They have lots of produce, then they have a big organic section, but they’re definitely thin on sort of the ethnic foods like foods that are specific from certain regions or where people will recognize specific labels. (interview, August 9, 2015)

Understanding where ingredients from home are located in Anchorage can better serve immigrants and refugees in food access (Taylor and Ard 2015). However, this funneling of food access into particular neighborhoods creates borders of inclusion and exclusion in food systems. This form of exclusion, such as the racial makeup of neighborhoods and familiarity with stores and types of food, can obscure avenues of access to “local foods” and

familiarity. When these neighborhood particularities are couched within histories of whiteness in the food system (Guthman 2008b), then exclusions by ethnicity and race and food create perceptions of what foods and food resources are recognized as part of Anchorage's local food movement. Fatima shows how familiarity with stores and certain types of stores allows her access to her local foods in Jordan that she cooks at home. But traveling between stores like the halal market or large-box grocery stores showcases the ethnic and racial boundaries of Anchorage's urban landscape. Places like the halal market or a Korean grocery store, frequently visited by GCG farmers, are not given the same recognition in local food movements as the Alaska Grown products found in some large-box grocery stores, nor are they equally accessible on public transportation routes or main roads. The distinctions between these large-box grocery stores of carrying either organic foods or "ethnic foods" further pushes categorizations of places of belonging within the "food rules" of purchasing organic or "local" foods. Aside from these large-box grocery stores in Anchorage, farmers markets became important sites for the marketing of Alaska Grown products and engagements of refugee farmers in Anchorage's local food movement.

While refugee farmers rely on purchasing networks within an immigrant and pan-Asian community in Anchorage to acquire foods from home, these differ from the foods from here, or the vegetables that they sell at three farmers markets in Anchorage. These differences between foods from home and foods from here are based on how the refugee farmers understand what is considered local food based on the dynamics they see at the markets. I frequented three farmers markets in Anchorage based on where GCG farmers sold their produce. These examples showcase the most visible forms of exclusion in the creation of a "local food system."

Puja, a Bhutanese farmer at GCG, believes that "local food" is grown in Alaska, much like the kale he was selling at the market. After the market, Puja hands me a plastic grocery bag filled with leftover kale, suggesting I take it home. The program coordinator at GCG said, "After we decided to grow kale at the garden, because I knew that it would sell well at the farmers markets, they wanted to take it home to eat. They replaced it for a green in a Bhutanese dish, but came back the next day saying, 'Anne, why do you like this? It's not good.'" The gardeners at GCG continue to grow kale because it is one of their best-selling products at the markets. Individual gardeners like Puja and Suba now grow kale in their own gardens to sell at the markets.

Suba said, “Puja and I sell this one (pointing to sesame leaves on the market table) instead of [sesame leaf] seeds because no one eats [sesame leaf seeds].” Puja and Suba’s affinity for vegetables that they perceive as nonpreferable by white customers at the farmers markets is supported by a normalness of cultural practices that go unacknowledged within community food movements, such as local food movements (Slocum 2006). Hegemonic discourses of “local” perpetuate normal behaviors, such as those performed at farmers markets, by overlooking how refugee farmers are excluded in the consumption of local foods despite being involved in their production. Puja and Suba navigate the unfamiliarity of local foods by trying to eat kale, but, similar to Nattat and Fatima, resort to finding ways to make familiar foods in the confines of their homes while engaging in a food system unfamiliar to them. Thus, Puja and Suba point to a disconnect of local food systems: while farmers markets bring consumer and producer closer, they only do so for particular types of consumers and producers who can access the local food movement.

Suba started gardening with other Bhutanese refugee farmers in 2012 and has continued to farm with GCG while also growing produce for her own consumption at other community gardens. Her understanding of access to farmers markets is determined by what she sees as common behaviors of vendors at the three farmers markets that I visited with her. The GCG program coordinator, Anne, told me that when Suba started selling her own produce, she was adamant about selling underneath the same tent as GCG because she was not able to purchase a tent on her own and she wanted to look like all the other farmers. Anne said, “I’ve been trying to get Puja and Suba to sell at [the other market] because they live over there, but Suba doesn’t want to because they don’t have a tent. She thinks that she doesn’t look *official* [Anne’s emphasis] unless she has a tent. I told them I wouldn’t mind buying them a \$30 tent so that they could sell their stuff separately at the market, but they declined” (conversation from August 5, 2015). For Suba, the unspoken rules of farmers market displays act as a barrier to feeling like she could be a legitimate vendor at the farmers markets.

At a Thursday market, Suba nudged me to the front of the table as an older white woman approached the GCG market stand. The woman looked directly at me and asked me about Suba’s sesame leaves that were neatly bundled with a rubber band at the stem. I encouraged Suba to tell the woman about how she cooks them at home. Suba nervously looked at me

and then began talking to the woman about eating sesame leaves with rice. Suba nodded me over to where she was standing and leaned close to my ear, whispering, “Sarah, I need you to speak with [the customers]. You know English better than me and can sell.” She was afraid that if she couldn’t speak English well enough, then she wouldn’t be able to sell her sesame leaves. Suba’s idea of belonging at the farmers market developed from her perceptions of white farmers who speak to customers in a native-English accent and display their produce under tents. In these cases, Suba and Puja’s experiences show how the outward appearance of their participation in the local food scene of Anchorage hides the barriers that they, as immigrants and refugees, are facing from truly feeling like agents within this scene. The inclusion of refugees and immigrants as producers of local food falls into the “local trap,” defined as an inherently good quality of the “local” (Born and Purcell 2006). Without attention to the weaknesses or complexities of what it means for these immigrants and refugees to produce local food, the local trap makes it easier to see only the benefits of producing local food while ignoring how the participation of immigrants and refugees in mostly white farmers markets puts them on the peripheries of local food movements.

Conclusion

While the immigrants and refugees I met while selling at farmers markets, growing vegetables in community gardens, and working in Anchorage’s restaurant industry have carved out a niche for themselves in Anchorage, they remain on the peripheries of dominant definitions of the “local food” movement. For them, “local food” is not just something that is grown in Alaska, or “of Alaska” as Nattat described. Rather, it is transformed as it moves between places called home or here, where immigrants and refugees find opportunities to bring familiar flavors, produce, and practices from their home countries to Alaska. However, these familiar and unfamiliar practices further illuminate the invisible barriers by which the “local food” movement further ostracizes the translocal nature of how these immigrants and refugees create their own local food systems. Despite providing the labor that grows these local foods, immigrants and refugee farmers continue to exist just outside the borders of alternative food practices by providing labor and vegetables to fill a whiter and wealthier demographic’s table. These local food spaces do not resonate with their food needs and

result in their having to obtain multiple garden plots to grow “food from here” for white customers at the market and “food from home” for their own families. These farmers earn an income from farmers markets but are doubly burdened with expending labor in local food spaces while facing barriers to inclusion in a local food system. These limiting factors of spatial proximity disproportionately favor family farms, which own the majority of agricultural land, and exclude refugee and immigrant farmers expending their energies and land resources to feed a local food movement that does not accept their own practices and vegetables as part of that system.

This chapter has offered insight into the lives of a few immigrants and refugees living in Anchorage, Alaska, and their understandings of the dynamic definition of “local food.” These narratives are personal and relatable in that they describe the complexities of how immigrants and refugees make sense of their new places of settlement through food practices and food choices. Thus, they reveal the importance of access to culturally important foods. By rooting my analysis of local foods in these narratives, I show the importance of understanding the multiple layers of local foods that are applied in home countries, in Anchorage, Alaska, in farmers markets, and in homes. I call for greater attention to those who remain at the peripheries of these dominant food movements in the United States and how these movements continue to foster exclusions regarding what it means to be “local.” Alongside many of my fellow chapter authors in this volume, my recommendation is not for a new definition of “local” but rather for more attention to how immigrants and refugees are carving out spaces of familiarity by connecting home countries and countries of settlement through the multiple meanings of food that can extend translocal foodscapes into “local food” systems. Through a more attentive perspective of what “local food” means, policymakers, scholars, and food movement participants may be able to foster greater opportunities for these populations that recognize that “local foods” can exist as “food from home” and “food from here.”

Notes

1. The names of all persons and organizations have been changed.
2. I utilize “local” in opposition to the mainstream definition of local foods as foods within a specific geographic distance.
3. As illustrated by Pollan (2008), Nestle (2013), Berry (2010), and Lappe (2010).

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