

12 “Here, We Are All Equal”: Narratives of Food and Immigration from the *Nuevo American South*

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Introduction

I don't want to speak ill of Americans—but often, they are very simple. Or rather, you eat something [American], and it has no taste. And I imagine that since Mexican food has flavor, I think that they try to identify a bit with us. I think that right now, Americans try your food because they want to involve themselves with you. Sometimes, there are bad, discriminatory people, but there are many, many good people. I think that they let us know that, that they're with us, yes? That they love the food, that has flavor—our food. Because that's what many people have told me. “It has flavor!” It's that this has something special. I think that's also why they come back and come back. Because they like how we treat them, and the flavor that we have. I'm trying to buy [this building]. And to make sure that it's not “fancy.” It's not an elegant place. But it's somewhere where we're going to receive you with—humility. That none of us are mightier, none of us are lower here. Here, we are all equal.—Laura Patricia Ramírez

The preceding excerpt is from an oral history interview with Laura Patricia Ramírez conducted by Gustavo Arellano for the Southern Foodways Alliance (SFA) in Lexington, Kentucky, in 2015. Laura was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, in 1968. She and her husband arrived in Paris, Kentucky, in 1985 so he could work in the horse racing industry. When they arrived, Laura estimated that there were maybe 30 or 40 Latinx living in Bluegrass Country. Now, she runs *Tortillería y Taquería Ramírez* in a section of Lexington nicknamed “Mexington” for the large number of Latinx immigrants living in the area.¹ Laura worked as a housecleaner before she and her husband opened their first restaurant, in 1997. At one point, they operated three restaurants and a nightclub, but they scaled back to the tortillería in 2000. Laura's story is part of a collection of oral histories collected by collaborators for the Southern Foodways Alliance (SFA) called “Bluegrass

and Birria” (<https://www.southernfoodways.org/oral-history/bluegrass-and-birria/>). The full collection features stories of restaurant and *heladeria* (ice cream shop) owners, chefs and cooks, and other food entrepreneurs across Kentucky. In the introduction to the oral history collection, Gustavo Arellano writes, “The majority of Mexican restaurants [in Kentucky] still offer combo plates of cheesy enchiladas and sizzling fajitas. But now *taqueros* sling chicharrones (fried pork skin with the meat still attached) and both *lengua* and *cabeza* (beef tongue and head). Restaurateurs prepare regional dishes like *birria* (goat stew), *barbacoa* (slow-roasted lamb or mutton), and *chilaquiles* (fried tortilla strips bathed in salsa and beans).” Indeed, these are just some of the tastes of the *Nuevo* American South.

We begin this chapter with Laura because her perspective provides a lens through which to consider immigrant food stories throughout the “New”/ *Nuevo* American South. This chapter features the voices and stories of Latina immigrant food entrepreneurs across the region, but we want to demonstrate that these women do not represent isolated or ethnically homogenous communities; rather, they are more accurately indicative of a diverse and dynamic globalizing South. We dedicate the bulk of this chapter to these women’s stories, told in their own words to SFA oral historians. First, though, we offer context for understanding these unique voices. While we do not contend that these stories are representative of the vast and diverse experiences of Latina food entrepreneurs in the South, we find that their perspectives offer insight into broader trends while also illuminating the uniqueness of each woman’s experience. Also, drawing on Garcia, DuPuis, and Mitchell (2017), we contend that these women’s stories collectively work to “disrupt the comforting notion that recipes and foodways... have traveled with us, unchanged, over many miles and generations” (Garcia, DuPuis, and Mitchell 2017, 3). Indeed, the stories we share demonstrate hybridity, adaptability, and change at the same time that they represent lasting connections to alternative homelands.

Context: Creating the “Nuevo” American South

Until quite recently, the US South received relatively fewer immigrants than did the industrial areas of the North and along the coasts. While other parts of the United States experienced rapid rates of industrialization and urbanization during the twentieth century, the southern economy continued

to be dominated by agriculture, primarily relying on the labor of African Americans. These conditions, combined with postbellum labor practices, including hostility to unions, made the South historically inhospitable to immigrants and perpetuated a "binary racial configuration" in the region (Winders and Smith 2012, 224). For this and other reasons, "for most of the twentieth century, observers and social scientists have seen the American South as locked in cultural isolation, first from the presumed mainstream life in the wider United States, and, even more, from the wider modern world beyond U.S. borders" (Peacock, Watson, and Matthews 2005, 1).

While that perception may persist, the modern reality is quite different: driven primarily by immigration from Latin America, the "Nuevo" South (Guerrero 2017) is the region of the United States experiencing the largest increase in its foreign-born population, from less than one million in 1960 to 13 million in 2013. Between 2000 and 2013, the South's foreign-born population increased by 55% (Pew Research Center 2015). These demographic shifts in the South pose challenges to the black-white binary that became prevalent during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Watson 2005, 280–281). The contemporary "transnational South" is a reality, forcing all to take new stock of the question of southern identity and the meaning of globalization in a formerly isolated region (Watson 2005, 278).

While the making of a "global" US South is a relatively new phenomenon, the dynamics that drive immigration to the region have deep historical roots. As Bankston (2007, 25) demonstrates, immigration early in the South's history, though much more limited in scope, was a product of the same social and economic forces that have fostered more recent movement to southern states. Specifically, the push and pull factors driving flows of people into the region (economic or political devastation in sending countries, economic opportunities in the United States, family reunification, and geographical access) have remained the same, even as their intensity has increased, and sending countries have changed over the course of the last century. Prior to the American Civil War (1861–1865), most immigrants coming to the region came through the port cities of New Orleans and Baltimore and were primarily of Irish, German, or French descent. Small numbers of Chinese laborers also settled in the region, but the vast majority of immigrants to the United States were attracted to industrializing urban areas in the Northeast, Midwest, and West, or to commercial agricultural work in the Southwest.

New waves of immigration to the US South have been dominated by immigrants from Latin America and Mexico, with the majority of those immigrants settling in what Bankston (2007) refers to as the “access states” of Florida and Texas—by sea or over land, these are obviously the two states with greatest proximity to sending locations throughout Mexico and Latin America. Because of the relatively long-standing presence of Latinx immigrants in Florida and Texas, Winders and Smith (2012) omit these two states from their thorough study of more recent waves of Latinx settlement throughout the US South, restricting it to what the authors refer to as “nontraditional destinations.” The states with the fastest-growing immigrant populations are what Bankston calls “opportunity states”: Georgia, North Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia. Among these, the agricultural and construction industries have attracted large pools of Mexican and Central American laborers to Georgia and North Carolina, while white- and blue-collar workers from South and Southeast Asia have been attracted to the service and professional industries of Maryland and Virginia. Even “limited migration” states such as Louisiana and Mississippi have seen increases in first- and second-generation Latinx migration as opportunities arise in the construction and restaurant industries. The ten states with the highest per capita growth in “Hispanic” population, as measured by the US Census Bureau, are almost all in the South. South Carolina saw the highest growth rate, followed by Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, North Carolina, Maryland, Mississippi, South Dakota, Delaware, Georgia, and Virginia (Lopez 2011).

This new migration reflects historic trends linking “events south of the border and movement across the border” (Kochhar, Suro, and Tafoya 2005, 42). Since the 1980s, economic restructuring, new immigration policies, and deteriorating conditions in several Latin American countries have drawn Latin American immigrants to the US South in ever-increasing numbers, challenging long-standing ideas and expectations about both “the South” and “Latino experiences” in the United States (Odem and Lacy 2009). As Winders and Smith (2012) argue, studies of the “Latinization” of new destinations within the traditional South can offer insights into the complexities of Latinx experiences across the United States. In particular, the authors argue, southern Latinx migration can refine our understanding of Latinx transnational practices in new southern locations, of racialization and how racism operates against Latinx in southern locales, and of neoliberal

globalization and practices of flexible labor experienced by Latinx workers at southern worksites (Winders and Smith 2012, 223).

Each of these themes resonates in the oral history excerpts that follow. Our narrators, who migrated from Mexico to Tennessee, North Carolina, and Kentucky, and from El Salvador to Virginia, to varying degrees embody "transnational" identities: the "multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states" (Vertovec 1999, 447). They engage in what Cravey (2003, 604) has referred to as "translocal ways of life," enabling them to maintain a connection to their place of birth while also cultivating connections to their "new" home community in the United States. Food—ingredients, recipes, preparations, and the sharing of meals with family, friends, and customers—is central to translocality for these women.

Food and food businesses are also essential to the somatic and cultural survival of each of these women within the United States. We are inspired by Abarca's (2007) analysis of Mexican women food entrepreneurs, who use their businesses to build familial wealth and strengthen community ties. Through a series of "*charlas culinarias*" (culinary chats) with women who own small food stands in El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, Abarca highlights the deep philosophical resonance of these businesses for much beyond capital gain. Though each of the stories we share in this chapter are distinctive, we find they share an emphasis on using food businesses to build familial and community "wealth" beyond the monetary.

These oral histories are part of a vast archive of stories collected by oral history collaborators for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Sara Wood, the second author of this chapter, was the SFA's lead oral historian from 2014 until 2017 and worked directly with a number of the collaborators featured here. These and all SFA oral history interviews are archived, and transcripts are available on the SFA website, along with the following description of the SFA's oral history program: "Our documentary work gives voice to the complex expressions of people and place through food, exploring race, class, gender, religion, labor, and other cultural issues. By collecting these stories, we honor the men and women whose hard work enriches the landscape of Southern food and culture" (<http://www.southernfoodways.org/oral-history/>). Photographs and audio clips accompany most interviews; we encourage readers of this chapter to explore the oral history archive to

encounter more stories connecting immigrants—individuals SFA director John T. Edge (2017) refers to as “active Southerners”—and their foodways. The three stories that we feature here, by Karla Ruiz, Zhenia Martinez, and Argentina Ortega, are just a taste of the continuing transformation of the US South. At the beginning of each excerpt, we list the narrator’s name, business, location, oral history project title (and corresponding URL), interviewer name, and date of interview. We also provide background information on each narrator. After each woman’s narrative, we offer a brief analysis to situate her story within the context of the “Nuevo” American South.

Karla Ruiz

Karla’s Catering & Prepared Foods, Mesa Komal Kitchen, Nashville, Tennessee Project: Nashville’s Nolensville Road (<http://www.southernfoodways.org/oral-history/nashvilles-nolensville-road/>)

Interviewer: Jennifer Justus

Date: February 11, 2016

Karla Ruiz came to Nashville from Mexico City in 2000 to visit extended family members. She was offered a job waiting tables at a Mexican restaurant and never left. She eventually found work in the back of the house at Belle Meade Plantation with one of Nashville’s most celebrated chefs, Martha Stamps, who helped her hone the lessons she had picked up—but had never written down—at her grandmother’s elbow back in Mexico. Karla learned to blend Mexican techniques with southern American ingredients, like empanadas bulging with southern peaches. After several years working with American chefs, Ruiz took the leap to start her own company, Karla’s Catering, in 2005. She prepares her dishes in Mesa Komal, the shared commissary kitchen of the Casa Azafran community center. Working at the community kitchen brings Ruiz close to other chefs and food entrepreneurs from a variety of countries—each of them aiming to share where they come from through their food. She explains:

I come from Mexico City and also a small town in Michoacán, [where] my grandmother used to live, and I came to visit friends. And the first time I came to Nashville I decided that’s going to be my home forever.

I learned to cook in Mexico but I don’t know that I was good at it, or I don’t even know that I enjoy it back then, because I do it as an everyday thing to do. I find out here under Martha Stamps that I can do different recipes, or I can create

recipes, and I think when I was here working for her is when I find out that I can do more than just Mexican or home cooking. I can create and identify some of the flavors and then create it again.

In Mexico, I remember watching my grandmom, watching her making Dulce de Leche. I remember every step that she showed me. What I think it makes me [able to] get here into big business is because I know the real flavors of food. I know the good flavors, or a Mexican dish, [and I would] learn that from my grandmom.

When I was in Belle Meade Plantation the dishes that I remember to present—and I was a little scared—that was empanadas, because they were very Latin-American dish that not many people in Belle Meade will know what is that or how they eat it. So, I present it with local squash blossom and cheese, and that was a hit. That's what I did that they love it, as well as I love Southern food, I love Southern culture, and I learn from [Martha] the love of the culture, the importance of cook to keep the family together. When I was working in a Mexican restaurant, I was thinking to myself, "Wow. Why do they think this is a Mexican food?" because [none] of that was really a Mexican food. I don't even think the rice we prepared that way. [Laughs] So, and we don't eat chips and salsa. So when I work for Martha Stamps I learn about American culture in general. I fall in love [with] the culture more than I was before, and I learned that they also have their dishes, and I think we all have the same kind of [dishes]. Like, I compare the cheese grits with tamales. It's the same ingredient, just prepared different way.

I was very nervous. I came with my son; he was six years old by then. I was nervous because I came from a home that was super, super protective. I was a single mother but my parents still treated me like I'm still their baby, and my son was their only grandson. We lived with them so it was very protective. Coming here [to the United States] and deciding to stay was very scary because now my son goes to school in a bus, which I was freaking out. He suffers because he doesn't understand anything what the teacher says and it was heartbreaking to go to school every day crying and he doesn't know what to do and ask [you] yourself every day, "Am I doing the right thing? Should I go back?" It was hard. People bullied him because he spoke Spanish and looks Latin. There wasn't a lot of Spanish people in that area, so it was difficult. It was heartbreaking also and every day I asked myself, "Should I go back?" and I just keep trying hard and staying, and now today I know that I did the best decision. I stay. My son now finish college and he's a very successful teacher, and I'm so proud of him. But back then it was hard to keep thinking: go back or stay here?

It was not long. The business started getting busier and busier. I remember that I thought, "This is my year. I'm going to make it [just with] the catering." I know that this is my life. I want to be in the kitchen every day the rest of my life.

Karla's story emphasizes the adaptability and resilience required of immigrant food entrepreneurs. To be successful, Karla had to learn to

prepare foods that blended ingredients and techniques she learned from her grandmother in Mexico with traditional southern foods more familiar to her clientele in Nashville. This strategy of adapting immigrant foodways to the palate of the host culture is well documented among scholars of both food and immigration. In fact, as Donna Gabaccia argues, the blending of disparate cuisines is precisely what created “American” food, if there is such a thing. She argues, “the American penchant to experiment with foods, to combine and mix the foods of many cultural traditions into blended gumbos or stews, and to create ‘smorgasbords’ is scarcely new but is rather a recurring theme in our history as eaters” (Gabaccia 1998, 3). The penchant for experimentation and combination is particularly prevalent in the New American South, where tamales, banh mi, yaka mein, bubble tea, and Karla’s sweet potato empanadas increasingly have a place in the southern food canon alongside fried chicken, collards, cornbread, and sweet tea (Edge 2017).

In Karla’s story, we also see the questioning and doubt that so often accompany the decision of voluntary migrants to leave their country of origin. Upon arrival in Nashville, Karla confronted challenges as well as opportunities. Karla had to weigh her young son’s experiences of discrimination against the opportunities she perceived would be available to him if she stayed in Nashville. At the time that Karla settled in Nashville, anti-immigrant sentiment was still relatively rare in comparison to other parts of the country (Odem and Lacey 2009, xvi). However, as the concentration of immigrants, particularly from Mexico and other Latin American countries, increased, so did native perceptions that immigrants were a threat to both jobs and “American” culture. This broader trend is evident in Karla’s concern that her son would face discrimination growing up in the American South. In the intervening years since this interview was conducted, anti-immigrant (particularly anti-Mexican) sentiment has reached new heights, in many cases reinforced and exacerbated by impassioned and unsubstantiated political posturing.

Zhenia Martinez

Las Delicias Bakery, Charlotte, North Carolina

Project: Charlotte’s Central Avenue Corridor (<http://www.southernfoodways.org/oral-history/central-avenue-corridor/>)

Interviewer: Tom Hanchett

Date: April 24, 2017

Zhenia Martinez co-owns Las Delicias, a Latina *panadería* (bakery) on Charlotte's Central Avenue. Her parents, Margarita and Aquiles Martinez, came from Mexico to Columbia, South Carolina, in 1985, when Zhenia was 11, gaining citizenship under President Reagan's 1986 amnesty legislation. A government bureaucrat in Mexico, Aquiles went to work in a restaurant, then moved into construction, where an accident disabled him. He stocked a van with Mexican groceries and drove to small towns to sell to newly arrived Latinx. Seeing the need for a Mexican bakery in Charlotte, he and Margarita apprenticed to a baker back in Mexico, then in 1997 opened Las Delicias. When Aquiles retired in 2011, Zhenia took up the work with her partner, Colombian-born Manolo Betancur. She says:

My dad studied economics. He was from a family that liked knowledge and sought knowledge. When we lived in Mexico, we had at least one wall that was completely covered from floor to ceiling with books. He didn't have your typical life. It felt like my dad was a nomad. He just liked going to different places, because we had lived in Mexico City and from there we moved to southern Mexico, and then to Puebla. And I think on one of the parades that we had for some celebration in Mexico—and my mom tells me the story—she said she saw so many kids that she thought, "My god, how are my kids going to find a job here?" We had an aunt [Licha Carrillo] living in the U.S., and that's when they decided that they wanted to move us to the U.S. They came in 1985. I started seventh grade.

When they first came, they worked as cooks. I don't think they ever saw it as bad. I think because it was an honest way to make a living and feed your family. Her clientele was mostly American. I don't remember seeing any Hispanic clientele. My parents left working for my aunt to find something to have. While working on construction [sites], my dad had already been through these smaller towns throughout North Carolina and South Carolina. So he bought Mexican products, put them in a van, and he started going to small farming towns to sell his products. And one of the things that he bought was pan dulce, and that's when he started to see how people were really looking forward to that, and I think that's when he got the idea that he wanted to open up a bakery. They went to Chihuahua [Mexico] to a small bakery and they basically said, "Would you teach us?" They learned everything that they could about pan dulce. It's so artful. I wish anybody that underrates pan dulce would go spend a day trying to make the stuff and make it come out as beautiful as it does, because everything has to be shaped by hand.

It was 1997. I'm twenty-one. I was on my own, and I was going to school and working and going part-time at Cracker Barrel. [Laughs] Of all the places, I know.

I didn't quite grasp all of that was going on back then, so it just seemed kind of odd and out of place for me. But there were a few times that people came in there, in all honesty, said, "I don't want her to be my waitress," for the exact same reasons that you would think, "because she's colored." We actually had people, regular customers, that didn't accept me as a waitress, but they accepted an African American. I asked somebody else, "Why is it that she can wait on them, but I can't?" I mean, not that I minded, because if I was going to be mistreated, then I'd rather not do it. But they said, "Well, it's because it's what they're used to." It's just little things like that, and it happened more than once where we would get customers that were set in their ways, to put it nicely.

I remember their first spring that [my parents] opened [the bakery]. We literally sat at the door waiting on customers, because there was nobody that would come in. It didn't look alive at all. I had come [back] in the early nineties [to] Central Avenue. I think it was a hard decision, because I know I had seen the toll that it took on my parents. But at the same time, I couldn't see the bakery going to anybody else. And to this day I can't. I think given all the years that we lived in South Carolina the community wasn't as big. So now when they moved here and opened up the bakery, I think it felt like the community grew, and it grew around them. Over the years bakers from other Latin American cultures would come and leave a recipe that we would get new products. So what started out as a Mexican bakery, we're now a Latin American bakery. And I think it's the same in the environment in the community we're growing, that it's no longer centralized. I think what's happening in Charlotte is that as we're growing so intertwined we're seeing a lot more influx of other cultures and sharing with them, not tailoring to just one customer but to everyone.

Zhenia's oral history is part of a collection of stories from Charlotte's Central Avenue Corridor. As the introduction to the collection on the SFA website explains, Central Avenue reveals Charlotte, North Carolina's, shifting demographics, "from working class textile mill employees in the twentieth century, to new immigrants in the 1990s" (<https://www.southernfoodways.org/oral-history/central-avenue-corridor/>). By 2000, Charlotte was the country's second-largest banking center, behind New York City, spurring employment opportunities for both white- and blue-collar workers. By 2005, the Brookings Institution ranked Charlotte as the second-fastest-growing Latin metro area in the United States (Hanchett 2013, 174).

In a study of Charlotte's Central Avenue Corridor, Tom Hanchett uses the analogy of the "salad bowl suburb" to describe the city's ethnically diverse corridor, where "many ingredients come together to create a new dish" (Hanchett 2013, 169). He describes a "jumble of little shopping plazas" where one can "walk to a Vietnamese grocery and two Vietnamese restaurants, a

Mexican grocery and taquería, a Salvadoran deli and two Salvadoran eateries, a Somali restaurant and grocery, an Ethiopian bar-restaurant-nightclub, and a Lebanese grocery-restaurant" (166). This is the dynamic context in which Zhenia's family's *panadería* continues to thrive, although the business was one of the first "ethnic" establishments along Central Avenue. Zhenia's family's experience of incorporating recipes from throughout Latin America in what started out as a Mexican bakery is reflected in Hanchett's observation that "people who have grown up in separate countries with separate cultures are now coming together to form a new 'Latino' community" (176). This is perhaps no more evident than in the hybridized Latinx foodways that flourish throughout the South.

Zhenia's account of the racism she experienced at Cracker Barrel and the preference among white customers for black (rather than Latinx) waitstaff also illuminates the complexities of the southern context. In *Latinos Facing Racism: Discrimination, Resistance, and Endurance*, Joe Feagin and Jose Cobas argue that the dominant white power structure shapes the fate of racialization for Latinx—that is, whether and which Latinx will be perceived as white, black, or some other racial category (Feagin and Cobas 2013). Despite persistent antiblack racism in the South, the relatively "new" presence of Latinx in the region complicates historic binary racial formations and perhaps presents new threats to whites' perceived racial hegemony. Certainly the perception of Latinx presence as a "threat"—to jobs, to "American culture," to the demographic dominance of whiteness, to notions of legality and justice—has only increased in recent decades (Plaza 2009, 22). In the South, this tension may be complicated by cultural and industry rhetoric that pits African Americans against Latinx despite their common oppressor (Stuesse 2009).

Argentina Ortega

La Sabrosita Bakery, Richmond, Virginia

Project: Women at Work in Richmond (<http://www.southernfoodways.org/oral-history/women-at-work-in-rva/>)

Interviewer: Sara Wood

Date: December 10, 2012

At 19, Argentina Ortega left Sensuntepeque, El Salvador, and moved to the United States. Shuttling back and forth between El Salvador, Southern

California, and Houston, she took baking classes and began earning a living working in a bakery. In 2005, Argentina settled in Richmond to be with her three sons: Mario, Eduardo, and Jorge Dawson. With a small business loan, she purchased La Sabrosita Bakery. At the time, the bakery had a poor reputation, with only a handful of clients. Gradually, she built an incredible reputation and customer base. In 2009, her sons' construction business slowed to a halt, so the four became partners and opened a larger space on Midlothian Turnpike, where the business sits today. Her customers hail from all corners of the world, and hundreds of deliveries are made each week, stretching beyond Virginia into Washington, D.C., Maryland, and North Carolina. As she tells it:

In El Salvador the days I feel they are longer. You have time for everything. You get bored because you have too much time. The University of El Salvador; it was a government university. There was a lot of women in the university but the career that I picked [business administration] there were just men. We were about five women. That university was a dream, beautiful, they took good care of it. But then the guerillas came and they started hitting the university. They tried to convince students about their ideas and some were okay and some were not. And I said, "I don't think I would like that." That's why I asked my family to send me to California. I was sad but I wanted to come. I tell my sons that at that time coming here was like going to the moon.

I wanted to start first a bakery in my country but never did it. And then when I came to California I worked at my husband's bakery. But [the marriage] didn't last too long, so I was in California having a bakery for four or five years and then I came [to Richmond, Virginia] and my son asked me, "Do you still want to have a bakery?" And I said, "Yes I want it," and luckily somebody that we knew was selling the bakery and I bought it. It was really tiny. Most of the recipes I have are from El Salvador. When I came [to Richmond] it was 2002 and there were a lot of Hispanics. Here in Richmond, I don't think we missed any of the food from our country. We looked for other foods just to have a variation but any food that we want to have is here because I see it here in the bakery. We have customers from South America, Central America, Puerto Rico and Middle East and Africa.

But the thing works like this. You come and then you're here in the states if you work. If you are honest you have a better life, a lot better than in our country and we like it and so why not share that with our family? And they send for a cousin, for family, for friends. People like it because here if you work, you have a home, you have your dress, you have your food, and that's your country. I think the 99-percent of the Hispanics moved here to survive, to have a house, to have food, to have dress, to have some money to help their families over there because there is a poverty in my country that you cannot imagine. I worked every day

around the house and when I was working I was talking to the Virgin, to God and saying "Just let me have my home, be independent; help me. I'm your daughter. Help me to achieve that." I just want to have money to pay my expenses to have an honest life and be happy and have my family. [*Laughs*] I never was thinking of having success or being a business woman. I just wanted to survive and have an independent life.

Argentina's story is just one in a collection of SFA oral histories from Richmond that feature "women at work." The collection shares stories of women entrepreneurs: cooks, oyster shuckers, farmers, restaurateurs, and bakery owners like Argentina. As the introduction to the collection describes the women, "They are gracious, bossy, patient, fierce, and kind. They elude the spotlight. They are busy, and they have to get back to work" (<https://www.southernfoodways.org/oral-history/women-at-work-in-rva/>).

Argentina emphasizes her familiarity with doing "men's work," dating back to her time in business school in El Salvador. Like many women in the food industry, Argentina had to balance inward and outward expectations of her as a mother and woman with her ambition to be independent. Women chefs, in particular, have faced considerable obstacles as the professionalization of cooking has emphasized masculinity and diminished the presence and role of women (Harris and Guiffre 2015). For Argentina, those challenges are compounded by having to adjust to a new home that felt, initially, like "going to the moon." Despite those challenges, and in partnership with her sons, Argentina was able to establish a tremendously successful business, using food to unite disparate communities in Richmond, whose Latinx population grew by 165% between 1990 and 2000 (Schleef and Cavalcanti 2009).

Argentina also comments on the wide availability of foods from El Salvador as well as other Latin American countries. While the "typical" (stereotypical) immigrant food story often involves someone lost among a sea of hot dogs and longing for an arepa, Argentina reminds us that many immigrants find both familiar and new foods in the United States. Argentina appears eager to try them all.

Conclusion

In this chapter's epigraph, interviewee Laura Patricia Ramírez speculates, "Americans try your food because they want to involve themselves with

you.” She sees food as a way to break down barriers, real and perceived, between herself and native-born Americans. This perspective, mirrored in such recent publications as Ying and Redzepi’s (2018) edited volume *You and I Eat the Same*, may come across as naïve or overly optimistic, and it is certainly the case that discrimination against and animus toward immigrants in general and Latinx in particular have heightened in the years since the SFA interviewed Laura in 2015. As other chapters in this volume demonstrate, the rhetoric and policies of the Trump administration have exacerbated anti-immigrant sentiment and threatened the safety and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of Latinx individuals living in the United States. It would be foolhardy to claim that food is or has the potential to be a panacea for widespread structural and interpersonal racism. It is also tempting, yet overly simplistic, to make general claims about the lived experiences of diverse groups of people.

We share the stories of Laura, Karla, Zhenia, and Argentina because each offers unique perspectives on the immigration-food nexus and demonstrates the power of narrative. They do not tell a single or unified story, but they do offer some themes to consider. Through these stories, we see the hybridization of diverse Latin American cultures and cuisines with one another and with more “traditional” southern foods and cultures. We see resilience, but also fear and doubt, in the face of discrimination. We see the unique challenges that women food entrepreneurs face, and strategies for balancing multiple responsibilities and identities. Perhaps most importantly, at a time when immigrants’ stories have been overshadowed by rhetoric and policies that dehumanize them on the one hand and well-meaning activists who would speak *for* them on the other, these narratives invite us to *listen*. Within food system scholarship and activism, narratives like these offer a way of restructuring who is telling the story. Through oral history, we can listen to these stories from real people, not statistics—from women who use food to draw connections between disparate communities and cultures, one bite at a time.

Note

1. Dr. Steven Alvarez coined the term “Mexington, KY” while teaching a course called “Taco Literacy” at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. The course, which has an accompanying blog (<https://tacoliteracy.com/>), was the subject of a

Southern Foodways Alliance *Gravy* podcast episode (<https://www.southernfoodways.org/gravy/bluegrass-tacos/>).

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