

13 Boiled Chicken and Pizza: The Making of Transnational Hmong American Foodways

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The Vang Family Thanksgiving

In the Sacramento suburbs, all the houses look alike, but the weekend before Thanksgiving, one house feels different. Over 20 parked cars are clustered around the home and sprawled across the quiet streets. Murmurs of conversation and the gleeful shouts of children are audible from outside. Because the Thanksgiving holiday conflicts with Sacramento's Hmong New Year's celebration, and because some individuals were spending the official holiday with in-laws, the four generations of this Hmong American family have decided to celebrate Thanksgiving early. Though they have been in the United States for only a few decades, like many American families, they enjoy the chance to gather and share a holiday meal.

Over 100 people fill the two-story home. In one room, men huddle around a large table, engaged in a lively conversation about sports and popular culture in a mix of Hmong and English. One young father holds his newborn daughter wrapped in a fuzzy pink blanket. Children are everywhere. The younger ones weave around the men, playing with toy cars and animal figurines, while older children line the stairs. A quiet group of teenagers are sprawled on the floor beneath a bright chandelier, each with an electronic device in hand. In an adjoining living room, the family matriarch, a petite, white-haired woman, sits on the couch. Her legal age is 97, but she claims to be 120. Either is possible, as the Hmong village from which she immigrated, deep within the jungles of Laos, did not issue birth certificates, and her birthday had to be approximated when she came to the United States in 1981. Although thin and aged, she wears a large smile as she animatedly talks and laughs with her daughters and granddaughters,

many of whom are swaddling newborns or watching toddlers nearby. Over the past century, this matriarch has seen her culture transform from self-reliant villages of subsistence farmers in rural Southeast Asia to a contemporary Hmong American community emphasizing higher education and dependence on modern amenities.

This gathering is more than a Thanksgiving dinner: it is an intimate family celebration and culinary affair. Two long kitchen tables are piled high with food. Three trays of papaya salad, a spicy mixture of shredded papaya, sauces, and chilies, sit next to a honey-glazed ham adorned with pineapple slices. A large bowl of mashed potatoes and bread stuffing neighbors a tray of beef and bamboo mixed into vermicelli noodles. Small plastic lunch bags packed with handfuls of balled rice sit next to a platter of Chick-Fil-A fried chicken. Trays of steamed vegetables and carved turkey crowd a large bowl of fruit salad. Deviled eggs, chicken potpies, and Hmong pepper dipping sauce are piled onto paper plates along with fried fish, a creamy salad, and store-bought dumplings.

This *mélange* of typical Thanksgiving dishes alongside rice, pepper dipping sauce, and vermicelli noodles represents the different influences and cultural fusions that inform the making of Hmong American foodways. Embedded within the rich and diverse display of dishes is a cuisine born from the interaction of Hmong and American traditions, adapted by generations of Hmong cooks to please the palates of their families. This chapter investigates Hmong American foodways, meaning not only what kinds of foods this community grows, cooks, and eats but also the integral role of food in the making of culture, identity, and meaning. Because food is both an important marker of one's sense of self (Robinson 2014; Douglas 1996) and a means through which individuals claim membership in a community (Mannur 2007), it can reveal much about the processes through which refugees and their descendants forge hybridized identities in their new homelands, even as they experience new forms of racialized oppression. Cultural geographers often refer to these sorts of identity formation processes as *translocal*, emphasizing that they are agency oriented and simultaneously grounded in multiple locales (Brickell and Datta 2011). In their study of Hmong *translocal* placemaking practices, Michael Rios and Joshua Watkins (2015) write that “the use of visual materials and other material objects enable[s] the symbolic and affective bridging between locations as well as a heightened sense of home even when the possibility of return is

nonexistent.” In our study, food serves not only as a material object but also as a process through which translocal identities are forged.

The little existing research conducted on Hmong foodways comes largely from nutritionists and public health researchers, who often cast their eating practices as an example of “dietary acculturation,” the process by which a migrating group adopts the foods of their new environment (Satia-Abouta 2003). This previous research was motivated by concern for Hmong Americans’ physical health, as evidenced by attention to rates of diet-related diseases and obesity, and often concluded by prescribing that Hmong Americans return to a traditional diet,¹ mainly rice and vegetables, with smaller portions of meat (Wilcox and Kong 2014). Problematically, this suggestion regards Hmong culture as static and unchanging, ignoring the role that migrant food practices can play in creating new notions of identity in their new homelands (Baker 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2014; Garcia, DuPuis, and Mitchell 2017).

Following a review of the literature and our research methods, we present data from a survey of 125 Hmong Americans that examines their food practices and the meanings they associate with them. In contrast to the public health research, our work reveals that Hmong Americans often enjoy Hmong cuisine, eat it regularly, and see it as integral to their senses of culture, identity, and family. However, they also eat a wide variety of dishes available in the United States, and sometimes even adapt Hmong dishes to incorporate ingredients and techniques from both American and other Southeast Asian cuisines, such as Thai and Vietnamese food. Through our emphasis on food as culture, rather than mere sustenance and nutrition, we have come to understand dietary practices as a means through which Hmong Americans create translocal, hybridized identities that are both distinctly Hmong and distinctly American.

History of the Hmong People, Migration, and Resettlement

The Hmong people are a transnational ethnic group who have lived in Southern China, Thailand, and Laos. The details of their origin story are contested by Hmong scholars and historians such as Mai Na M. Lee and Gary Lee, who employs postcolonial analysis to challenge the starring role too often given to colonial powers and attempts to reconstruct the Hmong origin story on their own terms (Lee 1997, Lee 2008).

Historically, the Hmong people lived in small villages, where they farmed rice, grew vegetables, and kept livestock (Ross 2013). In many ways, the Hmong people were autonomous and self-reliant, and these qualities helped preserve the Hmong culture amid social and political climates that marginalized and discriminated against them. In eighteenth-century China, for example, the Hmong did not share the same rights and privileges as the Han Chinese despite paying taxes and performing corvée labor.² Instead, the Hmong were barred from attending school, forbidden from visiting Han towns, and subjected to discriminatory laws with harsher punishments (Lee 1997). Categorized throughout dominant Chinese history as the Miao/Meo people, the Hmong were not recognized as a distinct and sovereign culture and were not historicized in an accurate and specific manner.

The Hmong began migrating to the United States in the 1970s, in the aftermath of the Secret War in Laos. For 25 years, the Hmong were recruited by the CIA to support the Royal Lao government in suppressing the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Communist forces (Ross 2013). When the Pathet Lao came into power in 1975, the Hmong were forced to flee, first finding safety in Thai refugee camps. Since then, Hmong refugees have resettled in France, the United States, Australia, Canada, Germany, French Guiana, and Argentina (Morrison 2008). Currently, there are over 4.5 million Hmong people across the globe, with nearly 300,000 in the United States (Lee 1997; Moua and Vang 2015). The two largest clusters of Hmong Americans are found in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Fresno, California, and many Hmong initially resettled elsewhere have moved to these areas, signaling the importance of translocal connections within transnational migration (Rios and Watkins 2015; Brickell and Datta 2011).

Hmong People in the Academic Literature

A small but growing body of scholarly literature attends to Hmong American experiences. In their historical discourse analysis, Kao Nou L. Moua and Pa Der Vang (2015) write that the scant publications that attended to Hmong experiences in the 1980s emphasized their lack of English skills and tribal culture as preventing assimilation. Such studies focused on unemployment (Yang and North 1998) or problems with acculturation (Sherman 1988). Summarizing these early studies, Ross writes that, “Consequently, many stereotypes of Hmong people persist: they are the least prepared

of all refugee groups to succeed in modern society; they are resistant to change...and they are unable to assimilate fully into American culture” (Ross 2013, 3). Decolonial scholar Eve Tuck describes this sort of research as “damage-centered” and seeking to “rationalize a group’s brokenness” (Tuck 2009, 413). In the 1990s, analyses shifted to a “social problems” approach in which researchers sought to improve rather than merely condemn the Hmong community. This research is characterized by a focus on acculturation, generational differences, and social and economic difficulties but continues to emphasize community deficits rather than assets. This perspective on Hmong immigrants was popularized by Anne Faidman in her well-intentioned but problematic 1997 best seller *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. While she is sympathetic to the Lee family at the center of the account, they are nonetheless presented as unable or unwilling to assimilate into or navigate the American medical system.

Presently, these themes are joined by more critical and intersectional analyses of Hmong American identities and experiences as, in the words of Hmong scholar Pao Lor (2012), “neither static nor stable.” Elaborating on this, Jacob Hickman argues that Hmong American identity “is much more than a unilineal shift from more-or-less Hmong to more-or-less American, rather the experience is nuanced and often fraught with multiple sets of meaning and ethics” (Hickman 2011, 248). These more nuanced approaches to Hmong culture and identity are the hallmark of Hmong studies. Hmong communities are a part of the constructed racial category of Asian and commonly experience what Kandice Chuh calls “Asiatic racialization,” meaning that hegemonic strains of US nationalism have “repeatedly denied or ‘nullified’ potential citizenship, by creating ‘Asians’ as different from ‘Americans’” (Chuh 2003, 15). However, Asian American studies has been predominantly focused on East Asian communities, rendering Hmong experiences invisible (Schein and Thoj 2009). Thus, Hmong studies remains in conversation with scholarship in Asian American studies and often employs similar approaches, including critical race theory (Wilcox 2012; DePouw 2012; Vue, Schein, and Vang 2016), poststructuralism (Vang and Nibbs 2016), and intersectionality (Boulden 2009), but remains a distinct field focused on Hmong experiences.

This chapter brings the Hmong studies approach to bear on questions of food, health, and agriculture, which have previously been studied mainly from the “social problems” perspective. With regard to farming, scholars

have documented the ways that university extension programs (applied programs through which land grant universities engage in research to assist farmers) attempt but often fail to serve Hmong farmers. For example, Goldberg (2008) describes how, despite extension agents' efforts, Hmong growers in Sacramento did not know how to access extension services, did not trust extension agents, and did not believe these services fit their needs (see also Ostrom, Cha, and Flores 2010). This mistrust may be rooted in Hmong experiences with the US government, which has applied labor and safety laws written for industrial agriculture to Hmong microfarms, in some instances fining them far more than their annual incomes for failing to cover extended family members (Minkoff-Zern et al. 2011; Sowerwine, Getz, and Peluso 2009). Other scholars have depicted Hmong agriculture as a solution to social problems. Some have analyzed the importance of Hmong farming and gardening traditions for their communities' food security and culture (DeMaster 2005; Ross 2012) and for preserving agricultural biodiversity and ethnobotany (Corlett, Dean, and Grivetti 2003). Others have highlighted the important roles Hmong farmers can play in creating more racially diverse alternative food systems and opportunities for friendly interracial interactions through food (Morales 2011; Slocum 2008; Alkon and Vang 2016).

Relatedly, research on Hmong health generally aims to document growing rates of obesity and diet-related illnesses, explaining this in terms of "dietary acculturation" and the consumption of fast food. Lisa Franzen and Chery Smith, for example, argue that "environmental changes and increased acculturation have negatively impacted the weight and health of Hmong adults" (Franzen and Smith 2008, 173). Rather than blaming individual eaters, scholars have critiqued federal nutrition guidelines for a lack of sensitivity to ethnocultural norms (Trapp 2010; Nibbs 2010) and have argued for what Stang et al. (2007) call "culturally tailored" nutrition interventions (Franzen and Smith 2008; Goto et al. 2010; Vue, Wolff, and Goto 2011). In response, organizations such as the American Diabetes Association have released literature aimed at orienting health professionals to Hmong American food practices (Ikeda 1999).

While these studies reflect important advances in public health research toward cultural appropriateness, they remain rooted in a damage-centered approach legitimating professional interventions designed to "bring good food to others" (Guthman 2008). Hui Niu Wilcox and Panyia Kong (2014)

write that “implicit in this narrative and the rhetoric of intervention is the notion that Hmong American food practice is not only different, but also deficient, and that Hmong Americans must have external ‘help’ to fix their diet.” This public health approach is built on an understanding of Hmong culture as premodern and static that fails to recognize the complexities through which refugee communities and their descendants engage with their new homes, including the crafting of new translocal cultural foodways. In contrast, our cultural approach is more similar to recent studies of other immigrant groups that are focused on creativity, hybridity, and meaning making (Garcia, DuPuis, and Mitchell 2017; Peña et al. 2017; Chapman and Beagan 2015). This approach has moved beyond academia; for example, a 2018 NPR story highlighted the fusion of “ethnic” and traditional American dishes on the Thanksgiving tables of many immigrant groups in a way that is very similar to Kat’s family’s experience (Gharib 2018), while the crafting of hybridized identities is the primary narrative animating celebrity chef Marcus Samuelson’s new program *No Passport Required*, in which he visits, profiles, and eats alongside immigrant communities (Alkon and Groszlik in preparation).

In sum, early scholarship on Hmong refugees and American-born Hmong criticized the community for not assimilating enough, while recent public health research criticizes them for becoming too assimilated. Neither recognizes the nuanced processes through which culture and identity are constructed and reconstructed through lived experiences. Furthermore, Wilcox and Kong (2014) argue that much of the research on Hmong American food and health attends only to populations with very low incomes but explains health problems solely in terms of culture. Instead of emphasizing acculturation, they argue that researchers should interrogate the interrelated effects of racism, sexism, and economic pressures.

While poverty does exist, contemporary Hmong communities are economically mixed (Zhou 2007). Our survey of Hmong Americans begins to disentangle the effects of culture and poverty by investigating the foodways of a group that is broadly middle class, college educated, and upwardly mobile. While previous scholarship too often historicizes Hmong people, we did not expect that Hmong Americans who have lived most or all of their lives in the United States would eat only Hmong foods. Our survey respondents maintain a strong preference for Hmong foods, the presence of culinary knowledge, and strong associations between Hmong foods,

family, and culture. Understanding these foodways helps to highlight the creativity, self-determination, and agency of Hmong communities as they craft new and evolving cultural identities that include Hmong, Asian, and American influences.

Research Approach

This chapter represents our first collaborative study of Hmong food and farming. As a Hmong American undergraduate studying sustainable agriculture, Kat is motivated by a desire to understand the cultural knowledge embedded within Hmong food pathways as well as to explore the ways food engages self-determination, knowledge production, and identity formation in communities of color. Alison is a white, Jewish professor who studies and writes about food justice. Her work is guided by a deep interest in the ways that communities of color create and engage in local food systems and the senses of meaning, place, and community that they derive from them. She became interested in Hmong food and farmers through a previous project on the predominantly Southeast Asian Stockton Farmers Market.

Research on Hmong communities depicts them as difficult to study, even for community members, a dynamic that Kat has experienced during past research. However, we have both found that Hmong Americans born or raised in the United States are far more open to researchers than earlier generations. For this reason, as well as the gaps in the literature noted earlier, we designed a survey to better understand the food practices of Hmong Americans. We distributed this survey via our social networks and relevant organizations through Survey Monkey, receiving 125 responses in just a few days.

Our sample was predominantly female and between 18 and 35 years of age; 70% were American born, while the remainder immigrated as children. Social class is often complex to determine, and this was especially true in our case. Most respondents placed themselves in the highest income categories, with approximately 20% earning between \$75,000 and \$100,000 and an additional 30% earning \$100,000 or more. However, Hmong Americans tend toward nonnuclear family arrangements, making it possible that this reflects more earners rather than higher individual incomes. Approximately 40% of our sample identified at least three adults living in the home, though it is unclear how many are contributing to their household

income. With regard to education, 42% of the respondents, their siblings, or their spouses had graduated from college, and an additional 32% had earned an advanced degree. Taken together, we believe these variables characterize our sample as middle class, educated, and upwardly mobile. This is quite a departure from the previous public health research, which tends to examine people with very low incomes, even while framing its findings exclusively in terms of cultural difference.

Our survey consisted of a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions. Beyond demographics, we were broadly interested in what people cooked and ate, with whom, and what these foods meant to them. We coded many of the open-ended questions into categories, allowing us to generate a statistical overview of responses while also including examples in respondents' own words. Several open-ended questions regarded respondents' preferred or most commonly eaten foods. For these questions, Kat used her own cultural knowledge to code the responses as indigenous Hmong dishes, Hmong American dishes, Hmong adaptations of other Southeast Asian dishes, and American food. In our analysis, we contextualize many of the foods listed by our respondents with material from public culture, including Sami Scripser and Sheng Yang's (2009) *Cooking from the Heart: The Hmong Kitchen in America*, which we believe is the first commercially published Hmong cookbook, as well as several blogs and videos devoted to Hmong cuisine. Indeed, we were both surprised to learn how much new media dedicated to Hmong cultural foods exist. This showcases enthusiasm for Hmong cuisine among young people, pushing back against the common historicization of Hmong culture as premodern. Blogs and videos especially demonstrate a sense of cultural fluidity through which young people express interest in traditional and evolving foodways.

Eating Hmong Foods

A large majority (71%) of our respondents eat Hmong food at least a few times per week, 92% prefer Hmong food to American food, and 85% believe Hmong food is healthier than American food. All but one of our respondents reported knowing how to cook Hmong food, with a roughly even split between those who knew how to cook a few dishes versus many dishes. This is clearly a community with a strong knowledge of and love for cultural foods. Specific dishes mentioned included *kopia* (Hmong chicken

soup), boiled chicken, pork ribs boiled with cabbage and ginger, and Hmong sausage, a coarsely ground pork sausage flavored with ginger, garlic, chilies, and lime juice that is commonly eaten in Pho soup or over steamed rice.

Cooking from the Heart offers an overview of Hmong cuisine as “simple, earthy, fiery and fresh” (Scripter and Yang 2009). The authors describe a traditional Hmong diet as white rice eaten with plentiful vegetables, small amounts of meat, and various fresh herbs and spices such as cilantro, lemongrass, hot pepper, and ginger. Condiments like fish sauce, oyster sauce, soy sauce, sriracha, and hoisin are common as well, and Hmong pepper dipping sauce is both so essential and varies so widely that the book offers 11 different preparations for it. Traditionally, food is steamed or boiled, and simple soups and stews are common. More recently, Scripter and Yang note, Hmong cuisine has been in dialog with other Asian cuisines. Cooks have developed Hmong takes on common dishes such as papaya salad and egg rolls and embraced techniques like stir-frying, deep frying, and broiling. As Hmong people have encountered new places, first in other parts of Southeast Asia and then around the world, their cuisine has mingled with other foodways.

However, several survey respondents pushed us to question the category of “Hmong foods” itself by expressing complexity as to what Hmong foods are. Several directly asked the question, “What is Hmong food?” Another wrote, quite lyrically, “I feel that anything I cook is Hmong food because I am Hmong. I always add my own spices (whether grown in my garden or bought from a store). My techniques are Hmong and my cooking tools are Hmong. Even if it’s lasagna, it’s Hmong because I made it.” These responses depict Hmong food as dynamic and inventive, shifting over time with the experiences and tastes of cooks and eaters. They also show the creative work involved in the process of translocal identity formation, where places become linked through material objects such as food and everyday practices such as gardening and cooking.

And yet we can speak of “Hmong food” because the same dishes came up over and over again. The most common were boiled chicken and chicken soup, which Scripter and Yang refer to as Hmong “signature dishes,” with significance in healing and religious rituals. Many of our respondents described these as among their most favorite comfort foods. For example, one American-born college student offered the following account: “I love freshly killed chickens with herbs. It just reminds me of my childhood

because my parents raised chickens so we ate it quite often, like almost every day. Also, when I first went away to college and would go back home to visit my family, my mom would pack a boiled chicken for me to take back home to college.”

In addition to foods specific to Hmong cuisine, many respondents enjoy dishes influenced by other Asian cuisines. Several respondents mentioned eating rice porridge—a dish common to many parts of Asia—as a comfort food when ill. Other respondents mentioned *nava* or *nab vam*, which they especially associated with Hmong New Year. The cooking blog Hmongfood.info describes these as a Vietnamese three-color sweet drink or dessert. Interestingly, a food associated with one of the most important Hmong events of the year is a Vietnamese dessert, despite the fact that sweets were not traditionally a part of Hmong cuisine. Through indigenous Hmong foods as well as foods influenced by other Asian cuisines, those people we studied create and re-create foodways that both symbolize and constitute their translocal Hmong American identities.

Indeed, 80% of survey respondents believe it is important to eat Hmong food, and their most commonly described reasons revolved around the themes of culture and identity. Several mentioned these words specifically, but others described Hmong food as “a part of me,” “deeply rooted,” or conveying “a sense of home.” One woman, for example, wrote that Hmong food “shows who I am and where I came from. Food is culture, identity and history.” For several respondents, and in contrast to the academic literature that emphasizes intergenerational conflict, food is linked to a strong sense of family. In the words of another woman, “It’s home cooked food that I crave. And it’s good to know parts of me and where I’m from. I think it somehow preserves our culture and provides a connection between our older Hmong generation and younger generation.” As these quotations exemplify, many Hmong Americans view food as a way to craft identities that incorporate and respect their cultural heritage and families. In addition, a smaller number of respondents believe it is important to eat Hmong foods because of health benefits (14%) or because it is tasty (6%).

Our survey respondents maintained this love for Hmong food despite the fact that just under half of them (49.5%) reported experiencing racism or microaggressions when eating Hmong food in public. For example, one young woman describes bringing “simple Hmong food such as plain steamed rice that has been kneaded with boiled egg and a pinch of salt”

to her elementary school cafeteria: “We’d eat this using just our hands in the school cafeteria and white kids would bully us for eating yellow poop.” Sometimes, these microaggressions pressured individuals to change their eating habits. For example, another young woman responded that instances such as this “made me never want to pack lunch to school, unless it was American food,” while another young woman from a more affluent home wrote, “Of course! [She has experienced this]. Hahaha. It made me not want to eat the food in public. But I still eat it often.”

Others, however, were not affected or were even emboldened by these remarks. One highly educated woman in her late twenties recalls being called a savage during high school for eating purple *ncuav* (Hmong style mochi) with her hands but claims she “didn’t think too much of it during that time, and it did not affect [her] desire to eat Hmong foods.” A highly educated, affluent man in his early thirties described a similar experience among adults: “Caucasian co-workers once complained that our food smelled and made a comment saying we should not bring Hmong food to work or warm up our food and eat in the same break room. No, it did not affect me one bit. I brought in crazier food with stronger smell and spices the next day.”

Interestingly, several respondents replied that they did not experience these sorts of microaggressions as children because they received federally funded school lunch. Poverty seems to have sheltered at least some of those we surveyed from a common racist experience.

Regardless of the perception of Hmong foods by others, it is beloved by the Hmong Americans we surveyed; 92% of our respondents preferred Hmong food to American food, mainly for its flavor. Respondents describe Hmong cuisine as tastier and more satisfying, with several referring specifically to spice and a love for pepper dipping sauce. Others prefer Hmong food because it is healthier, easily customizable to personal tastes, and easier to cook.

Growing Hmong Food

This preference for Hmong food helps to support and is supported by a strong interest in food cultivation, confirming Lee’s (2005) observation that “agriculture is closely interrelated with other aspects of Hmong society.” While none of our survey respondents are commercial farmers, 79%

described family involvement in growing food. Older generations were often the primary growers, but 42% of respondents participate in some way. These families cultivate a wide variety of vegetables and herbs, including those common to Hmong cuisine. Examples include green mustards, cilantro, *taub* (Asian pumpkins), cucumbers, and bitter melon. Several respondents mentioned ingredients for specific dishes such as “medicine herbs for chicken soup.” Only 21% of our survey respondents’ families sold food, and they did so mainly at farmers markets (12%) and Asian grocery stores (8%).

Previous research has largely painted growing food as of interest mainly to older generations of Hmong (DeMaster 2003; Brady 2011; Rose 2013). However, most of our respondents (72%) actively grow or plan to grow food with their own children. Their reasons for doing so were rarely culturally specific but instead focused on the food itself as healthier, fresher, cheaper, and more accessible. Several even offered responses common to supporters of the broader national movement for local, sustainable, and/or organic food, such as, “I believe in knowing where my food comes from and what’s in it.” This is similar to Alkon and Vang’s findings from interviews and surveys of Hmong farmers and customers at predominantly Southeast Asian farmers markets. The cultural nature of food was often unstated amid emphasis on price and quality (Alkon and Vang 2016).

Despite these practices of food cultivation, the bulk of our respondents purchased their foods from Asian Markets (94%) or mainstream supermarkets like Safeway or Wal-Mart (84%). In addition, nearly half of those we studied made use of farmers markets, farms, and their own gardens. From her research in Rhode Island 15 years ago, Kathryn DeMaster found that “obtaining preferred Hmong foods would be difficult, if not impossible, were they not grown by Hmong agriculturalists persisting in their knowledge and practices” (DeMaster 2005, 116). In contrast, those we studied show that they can find appropriate food from a wide variety of sources, but many choose to cultivate food or purchase directly from those who grow it.

But Not Only Hmong Food

Our survey respondents expressed preferences for Hmong food but did not eat it exclusively. We asked respondents to write down everything they had eaten the previous day; 58% mentioned at least one traditionally Hmong or Hmong American dish. Only 5% of respondents, however, ate these foods

exclusively, with the vast majority eating some Hmong food, some food from other Asian cuisines, and some American food throughout the day. For example, one young, college-educated woman listed “squirrel stew, papaya salad, boiled chicken, waffle, sweet rice in banana wrap, mini pizza from Food Co.” Several of these dishes are included in *Cooking from the Heart*. The book offers a recipe for *Nqaij Nas Hau Xyaw Txuj Lom*, or squirrel stew with eggplant, in which the squirrel meat is soaked in dark beer to remove some of the wild flavor and then boiled with garlic, lemongrass, chilies, lime leaves, galangal, and ginger before adding the eggplants, basil, Sichuan pepper, and fresh cilantro. The cookbook explains that, traditionally, “Hmong men enjoy hunting wild squirrels. In a Hmong home, no meat is ever wasted, so Hmong women still make this old-fashioned stew.” The authors also include a recipe for *Txhuv Nplaum Qhwv Nplooj Tsawb*, or sticky rice in banana leaves, a dish common to many Asian cuisines. In this version, the rice is steamed with coconut milk and sugar and then stuffed into a banana leaf, folded up, and steamed again.

In addition to these typical Hmong dishes, the respondent also listed papaya salad, which Kat classified as a Hmong American dish. In contrast to the sweeter versions served at Thai restaurants, the Hmong version is generally spicier and more sour. While this is not a traditional Hmong food, it has been embraced by Hmong cooks and is often sold at New Year celebrations. And of course, waffles and pizza are commonly considered to be American food. This respondent demonstrates the ways that Hmong Americans weave together different ingredients and dishes to create a way of eating that is sometimes culturally specific and other times generically American, much as their larger identities are both Hmong and American in a way that is neither straightforward nor linear.

Conclusion

In contrast to the public health literature problematizing dietary acculturation, our survey reveals that Hmong Americans continue to grow, cook, and eat Hmong food. However, they also enjoy American food and food from other cuisines. These foodways are a part of their hybridized, translocal identities; they are both Hmong and American and move between their heritage and new homelands in ways that defy the linearity common to

metanarratives of assimilation but are consistent with contemporary scholarly works on immigrant foodways.

The literature on Hmong food and health prescribes a return to traditional foods without a fine-grained understanding of current Hmong Americans' food practices. These researchers are working from a damage-centered perspective (Tuck 2009) with very small samples of mainly high-poverty individuals, and it is possible that their analyses conflate class with culture. Given that the overwhelming majority of the Hmong Americans we surveyed reported regularly consuming Hmong food, it is also possible that the public health experts are advocating that Hmong Americans should eat Hmong food exclusively. This is not a reasonable expectation for any ethnic group and historicizes Hmong Americans as premodern, ignoring their agency in processes of contemporary racial identity formation.

Cuisines evolve over time, especially when carried by immigrants and refugees around the world. Our respondents, as well as public media such as cookbooks, cooking blogs, and videos, demonstrate that Hmong foodways as they are maintained in the United States have come to encompass variations on other Southeast Asian dishes and techniques. In this sense, Hmong foodways parallel the stance of Hmong studies as an academic discipline. They are Asian and intersect with a variety of Asian cultures, but maintain a uniqueness that cannot be collapsed into the Asian immigrant experience. This suggests an approach, not only to the study of foodways but also to culture more generally, that emphasizes the ongoing construction and maintenance of translocal identities.

This study represents the very beginning of an ongoing research project aimed at understanding Hmong American food and agricultural practices. While we have documented the consumption patterns of American-born and American-raised Hmong individuals, we have only begun to explore issues of meaning and identity in a rich and substantial way. We have not yet heard the stories that Hmong Americans tell about various dishes, nor have we witnessed their roles in cultural traditions. We have begun to ask questions about gender and cooking practices but have not been able to understand how they reproduce or shift patriarchal norms. Future research can provide a more detailed understanding of food practices and their cultural meanings, and can attend to the role of agriculture in Hmong senses of self, community, and place.

As relatively recent immigrants with a rich cultural history, Hmong Americans are an important yet understudied group who are currently weaving their ethnic traditions into the fabric of American identity. In the tradition of ethnic studies more broadly, the Hmong studies literature aims to document and analyze this process, highlighting both the challenges this community faces as a racialized minority and their agency in creating new ways of being. The literature on Hmong food and health, however, has not incorporated this approach, despite the fact that it is increasingly common to studies of immigrant foodways. This chapter seeks to build bridges between these fields of scholarship, aiming for a deeply nuanced, culturally informed approach to health. Moreover, it demonstrates the ways that food can serve as a powerful lens through which to examine immigrant experience, documenting structural barriers while highlighting the agency through which communities draw on their histories to create new cultural identities.

Notes

1. We are cautious about terming this diet as traditional, as it implies something static and unchanging in precisely the way we are arguing against. However, alternative terms, such as precolonial, do not map well onto the Hmong experience, and “traditional” is the word that many contemporary Hmong Americans use to refer to these foodways (Scripter and Yang 2009).
2. *Corvée* labor is a feudal system of unpaid, often forced, labor exacted in lieu of taxes (Lee 1997).

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