

In Ethnic Restaurants, the Melting Pot Takes on New Meaning
By Mara Tapp
Special to the Tribune

Deep in the recesses of a bakery in the Andersonville neighborhood on Chicago's North side, a young Ecuadorian drops falafel batter into a wok filled with hot oil and lifts out the golden brown patties for a bustling clientele waiting upstairs.

Call it "out of the frying pan and into the melting pot" – or, in this case, wok. Such scenarios at places like the Middle Eastern Bakery and Grocery are becoming more and more common in Chicago and other major American cities as immigrants take jobs that require them to learn the cuisines of other lands and help them to move up the ladder of assimilation.

Hosam Khalifeh, a Palestinian who, with his brother Hisham, owns the Middle Eastern Bakery jokes that his staff is an "international operation." Indeed, a Polish woman supervises his baking staff of six – none of them Palestinians or even Middle Easterners.

Not far away in the Lakeview neighborhood, Ecuadorians are assistant sushi chefs. A young Spanish woman prepares the French pastries at the award-winning Brasserie Jo in River North. In fact, all over town people are cooking other people's food.

"You go to any restaurants – big or fancy restaurants downtown – and you find if they're doing Italian food, the chefs are not Italians or if they're doing American food, the chefs are not Americans. They're either Polish or Mexicans or maybe Arabs," says Khalifeh, adding, most Americans don't mind as long as the food is good. "That's the standard in this country."

Indeed, behind the swinging doors to many of Chicago's best kitchens are chefs of unexpected ethnicities.

"We have about 25 employees in the kitchen, none of whom are Russian," says Vadim Muchnik, who owns Russian Tea Time with his mother, Klara. Although as chef she oversees the preparation of dishes from many regions of the former Soviet Union, she relies on assistance from Latin American immigrants including a Mexican sous-chef.

"My mother says it's much easier to work with people from other countries when it's your own food," explains Muchnik. "Say it's Russians – there will be a lot of opinions."

Jean Joho, Chef-owner of Brasserie Jo and the Everest – where another Mexican native, sous-chef Francisco "Paco" Lopez, has worked for nearly a decade – calls this kind of crossover a uniquely American phenomenon.

“Here you have a lot of opportunities” says the Alsace native, “and in this country you can do whatever you want to do. I think that’s not possible in our countries.”

At the sushi restaurant Nohana, Manager Hiroshi Furugaki pauses and looks dubious when asked if the Ecuadorian brothers-in-law on whom he relies could be assistant sushi chefs in his native Japan. The Japanese think the “sushi chef should be Japanese also,” Furugaki admits.

There are Americans who share that traditional Japanese view. Among them is Gary Fine, a professor of sociology at Northwestern University who has studied restaurants.

“There is nothing about making sushi that is necessarily Japanese or about making hummus that is necessarily Palestinian but I had to ask myself would I go to a restaurant in which I knew that Ecuadorians were making sushi and the answer was probably not, because there is something about sushi that comes out of the Japanese culture,” says Fine.

“Eating ethnic food is not just eating ethnic food: It’s engaging in an experience. It’s this romantic notion of the ethnic experience.”

Wouldn’t some find that view a bit parochial? Even ethnocentric?

“One certainly can be criticized for that view but [it] comes from a good multicultural impulse,” he responds. “The reason you want to go to an Ethiopian restaurant is you want to eat Ethiopian food. And if you find out that Argentines cook Ethiopian food, it’s not the same.”

Perhaps not, but many will buy their falafel, sushi or crème brulee from non-natives if it is well executed. The proof is in the pies – be they spinach, meat or eggplant.

When the Khalifeh brothers opened the Middle Eastern Bakery in 1981, they stuck mostly with traditional pies of spinach and cheese. But demand led to expansion – and a restaurant. The bakery now makes 150 dolma (stuffed grape-leaf rolls) and 200 pies daily in eight varieties, including chicken and broccoli and olive, parsley and feta.

Although his original intent was to serve Middle Easterners, Khalifeh estimates that 85 percent of his customers are now Americans. And his head baker, for the last 11 years, has been a Polish native.

Even though Susanna Novak had attended two cooking schools in Poland, she says she was unfamiliar with Middle Eastern cuisine before being hired at the bakery. But now, Novak says, “I like this work” – then adding, “I like too much this work.” She describes her basement headquarters as home and her boss and colleagues as family.

Hosam Khalifeh, who spent a year in a Romanian Medical School, before coming here in 1979, learned to speak Polish so that he could communicate with Novak. She is, he notes with pride, third in command, after his brother and himself.

There are reasons for the successes of people like Novak.

“It’s the opportunity factor,” Khalifeh says. “People come here and they are willing to learn ... willing to switch to do foods other than their nationalities. ... The opportunity here exists that people can do other things than what they are used to doing at home and this opportunity does not exist maybe in other countries. This country is a melting pot.”

“The restaurant business has a thin veneer of glamour, but for the most part is gritty, hard work and not everybody is willing to do that,” says Bill Ammons, who as owner of the now-closed Star Top Café on Lincoln Avenue hired a dozen or more Ecuadorians over the years in his kitchen – first to wash dishes, but soon relied on them as cooks. “The people who get into it either aggressively love the business [or they are] people who really don’t have much alternative because they don’t speak the language or they don’t have the skills to get some other job.”

And for many, restaurant employment can become a ladder to success.

“The simple process is you start washing dishes in a restaurant, they need extra help chopping vegetables,” explains Ammons. “You learn how to cut vegetables. They need extra help on the fry machine. You learn how to fry vegetables. Eventually you work your way in so that you actually know how to do something in a restaurant and since there aren’t very many people who are willing to put up with the aggravation of getting burned and cut a lot – It’s a dangerous occupation. Everything you work with is either red hot or razor sharp – you don’t have a lot of competition.”

Ammons could be talking about Karina Rivas, who was born in Chicago but reared in La Coruna, Spain. When she was 20, she returned to Chicago, hoping it would offer better employment opportunities than Europe.

Her father, the maitre’d at Toulouse, got her a job at Maggiano’s. Even though she was from a restaurant family – her mother also worked in a restaurant – Rivas had never cooked.

“The first day, I cut my fingers,” she recalls. But she must have done something right because the chef gave her a chance to work in pastries. Ten months later, Jean Joho hired her as his pastry chef at Brasserie Jo, where she’s been since it opened two years ago.

Like Rivas, Luciano Juncal and Manuel Gualpa, brothers-in-law from Ecuador, were drawn by the American job market. And, like her, the assistant sushi chefs at Nohana are

familiar with a range of cuisines.

Juncal, a former factory worker, spent several years at an Italian restaurant mastering spaghetti, ravioli and linguine. He has been at Nohana for five years. Gualpa, a former construction worker, worked in Chinese restaurants before coming to Nohana seven years ago. He prefers Japanese food because it is easier to prepare.

There is, the brothers-in-law note, no sushi in Ecuador.

Night after night, the brothers-in-law stand side-by-side with the main sushi chef and make the hand-rolled sushi and other delicacies for those who frequent the crowded Lakeview eatery. They are, according to its manager, indispensable. "We rely on them totally," says Hiroshi Furugaki.

Similar sentiments were voiced by Heaven on Seven chef Jimmy Bannos, who with his brother George owns two downtown restaurants specializing in Cajun and Creole cuisine, in speaking of Carlos Gramajo. The employee of 13 years is "a superstar," he says. "I'm talking a superstar. He's awesome. I would never have done my second restaurant if I didn't have this guy." Like others in the business, the Guatemalan immigrant started out as a dishwasher, then moved to busboy, then cook, and now sous-chef.

At Russian Tea Time, the Muchniks have such faith in their kitchen staff that they are using their workers in their new catering business, which offers international kosher cuisine.

"When our customers inquire, they say, 'How is it possible? It is like my grandmother used to make,'" says Muchnik. "And we say, 'A good cook is like a good chemist: You give him a formula.'"

That kind of ability and flexibility helps immigrants around the city and country move into kitchens and master cuisines once unfamiliar to them. In so doing, they partake of the American experience.

Two years ago, on Bannos' birthday, he went to see Gramajo sworn in as a U.S. citizen.

Recalls the Greek-American chef, whose four grandparents were born in Greece: "It made me want to be an immigrant all over again."

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