IS THE KITCHEN THE NEW VENUE OF FOREIGN POLICY?

IDEAS ON FOOD AS A TOOL FOR DIPLOMACY, BUILDING PEACE AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

A REPORT OF THE CONFLICT CUISINE® PROJECT,
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY, SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL SERVICE
Conflict Cuisine explores the nexus of food and war. It includes the study of war’s impact on food security and its role in political and economic development by governments and citizens of countries that have experienced war or conflict. Conflict is multidimensional, as is the concept of food security. Even though there has been much research on the role of food supply in managing political conflict, the role of food in war and conflict has been understudied. There is still much to be learned about how food security is affected by conflict, and how conflict affects food security. In this context, food as a tool of diplomacy and as a mechanism for conflict resolution becomes particularly relevant. Food has the potential to bring people together, and to help build peace and understanding between nations. Conflict Cuisine aims to provide a platform for discussing the role of food in conflict and post-conflict societies. It seeks to explore the ways in which food is used as a tool of diplomacy and as a mechanism for conflict resolution. It also seeks to highlight the importance of food security in promoting peace and stability. Conflict Cuisine is an interdisciplinary field that brings together experts from various fields, including anthropology, sociology, political science, and international relations. The field of Conflict Cuisine is rapidly growing, and new research is being conducted all the time. As the field continues to evolve, it is important to keep an open mind and a willingness to learn from new perspectives. Conflict Cuisine is a field that is constantly in flux, and will continue to evolve as new research is conducted and new insights are gained. Conflict Cuisine is an exciting field that offers many opportunities for research and collaboration. It is a field that is constantly evolving, and is likely to continue to grow in the future.
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Speaker Biographies

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Scholar-in-Residence
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American University

Many people have made the Kitchen as the New Venue of Foreign Policy conference and report possible.

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At the School of International Service, Amy Schmemann, Dean of Communications and her team, Amy Gilgesie, Cara Legnasi and Anne Cawkins have provided invaluable advice and assistance. Aka Cummings of the GUS Hall has been floor manager and all around advisor bringing our ideas to reality. Paul Johnson of the AU Communications team has also been a key supporter and friend.

Students who were enrolled at the conference from my Conflict Cuisines course during the 2015 spring semester helped ensure that the event went smoothly and guests at the university were welcomed to campus.

Caterer Carlos Cesario, chef and visionary, has made it possible as the impresarios of eating, getting our conflict cuisines ready for lunch.

Special thanks are due to the American University brand of Spoon University. http://american.spoonuniversity.com/ and in particular Maki Somiya, its Director of Marketing and Business Development who created the artwork for the conference poster and program, but also provided us with wunder ful food to share with participants.

My thanks goes out to the School of International Service faculty and especially to former Dean Louis W. Goodman, Ambassador Anthony Quarton, Professor Gary Weaver, Professor Nanette Lawrene, Professor Rose Okotcha, Professor Lee Schwietzer and Dean James Goldgeier for their ongoing support of this project.

A special thanks to Ms. Halle Czechowski for her editorial expertise and patience in the production of this report.

Finally, I am grateful to the generous gift of the Mann-Paller Foundation that allowed us to host the conference, develop the report, and to have confidence in the concept of conflict cuisines.

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There is no doubt about the centrality of hunger and war. But we neither anthropology nor history nor development nor economics, about how food is both a tool to communicate culture, but also Conflict Cuisine. And so my curiosity about the relationship between in order to live.” These recipes were their stories.

“Where they can no longer to knead the dough, how to braise a brisket, what gave those butter cookies that texture and taste. All these things, and in these stories of horror and a world gone wrong, but they were also stories passing from generation to generation. All those secrets – how wonderful cook and writer, was also an “American.” She became Austria. The desserts of Vienna. Warmth. Joy. Love. My mother, a wonderful cook and writer was also an “American.” She became the translator of recipes for this generation of women. While all our family’s friends told their stories of journey to America they also carried their culinary baggages. Special recipes, passed from generation to generation. All those secrets – how to knead the dough, how to braise a brisket, what gave those butter cookies that texture and taste. All these things, and in these stories of horror and a world gone wrong, but they were also stories that lived and shared these memories with others who had similar stories.

My earliest memories of conflict cuisine are the stories my mother told me. Sitting in our kitchen in New York, I heard how many, many displaced by the conflicts in our homelands to tell the American dream. Nations have recently discovered that food can be the perfect hook to engage their audience in a world of competing economic interests. Middle powers like Peru and Mexico have taken advantage of their great cuisines and chefs to promote their food to the pinnacle of diplomacy, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and national identity.

Conflict cuisines have been a feature of Washington’s restaurant scene for decades. High-rolling foreign dignitaries, telling where we were at war by what new restaurants opened – was evident with each new ethnic cuisine that emerged in our city. Today, the changes in our immigration policies, has constrained this part of our culinary scene. Tim Cameron of the Washington Post, who has also documented the “empty chairs” of our city, has also become the unofficial culinary ambassador of ethnic food. He will be interviewing some chefs – not the big names, but people who could teach others – about how they were these international foods in the middle of high end Washington restaurants. In this story, he recounts these chefs emerging from their histories of conflict and strife to welcome their homelands to tell the American dream.

Thank you.
When my daughter at 2-years-old sat in her highchair grabbing the last bits of my homemade macaroni and meatballs and joyfully exclaimed, “I love food!” my then 87-year-old Italian immigrant father was witness to this delicious moment and put his hands together in prayerful thanksgiving to the Lord to say, “my work here is done!”

As a child and grandchild of immigrants who came to the US and opened a small Italian grocery store and a neighborhood Neapolitan pizzeria, I understand the concept of a food culture – or gastro-diplomacy as it is called now – the use of food as symbol of national identity as well as a tool to assimilate into an adopted country.

We were part of a large ethnic diaspora in Connecticut, many of whom left their homeland for reasons of poverty – and I can identify with that aspect of creating a food culture that Johanna Mendelson Forman teaches here at American University in the Conflict Cuisine course.

I also had the memory of moving here to Washington in 1981. I could not find decent Italian food but I quickly became acquainted with exotic restaurants that featured the cuisine of other cultures and immigrants to this area – restaurants such as Vietnam in Georgetown, or Mama Ayesha’s Middle Eastern restaurant in Cleveland Park, the Red Sea Ethiopian restaurant in Adams Morgan, or El Tamarindo and also Omega – the El Salvadorian and Cuban restaurants in Adams Morgan.

All of these countries and populations that had seen their share of conflict and resulting migration. These were the culinary diplomats who used action-forcing events in their countries to create traditions that are now part of our culinary identity.

Much later, while working at the State Department and the White House, I was first hand the use of food as a tool of diplomacy – quite literally delicious use of soft power through the art of culinary diplomacy.

For example, in the planning of State Dinners for foreign heads of state we are eager to showcase our food culture and cuisine, while also giving a nod to the cuisine culture of our foreign guest by utilizing a guest chef, or incorporating a symbol of our guest’s national identity in the menu.

But, also during those years I saw the nexus between food and disease and food and conflict. In my travels to nearly 70 countries including many post-conflict nations in the Middle East, Central America, Africa and South Central Asia I saw firsthand the ravages of war – and the resulting food insecurity – as a great threat to sustainable development.

Even in the poorest countries –hardened by the most challenging circumstances – our foreign hosts were always eager to share their culture through their foods and offer whatever they have on their table as a tool of communication about their way of life.

I can distinctly remember tasting the juice of pomegranates in Afghanistan, or of cassava in Liberia. And I definitely have vivid recollections of fermented palm wine when sitting in a yurt in 18-degree weather in Ulanbantur, Mongolia. That drink might have a hard time finding a place on a menu at home – and certainly was far less appealing to me than the Pisco sours I was offered in Peru!

But they all had the same effect. They told a story about how food is essential to understanding how people relate to each other. That’s why this discussion is so exciting. The experts participating in this discussion are sharing their knowledge on an important topic of food and what we can learn about history, culture – and conflict – by examining life around the table.
CULINARY DIPLOMACY, GASTRODIPLOMACY, AND CONFLICT CUISINE: DEFINING THE FIELD

In the United States, culture is popularly defined by the public parameters of art, music, literature, cinema, theater, and food. These are the most visible signs of a culture. But real culture resides internally. It is the beliefs, and worldviews, that are instilled by family and community and passed down from generation to generation.

The visible differences are what most often engage us but cultural clashes often occur with the internal differences at the value level. “You wake up one morning and it occurs to you,” they’re not playing cards with the same deck you use back home. They don’t think the way you do. They don’t share your worldview, your values. You’re disoriented, you’re confused, but that’s where you really learn culture,” said Dr. Gary Weaver. It is through questioning why and placing oneself in another’s psychological and cultural shoes that understanding begins about one’s self and one’s culture. Cultural clashes often occur with the internal differences at the value level. But it is also a bridge builder. It is emotional; it triggers memory; it explores history, and it defines you who are.

FOOD AS A FORM OF ENGAGEMENT

With a background in both academia and diplomacy, Tara Sonenshine, Professor, George Washington University, and former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy started the discussion by detailing how food is used as a form of engagement.

Sonenshine noted, “We all like to eat and we all like to eat all kinds of different foods.” Diplomacy is about finding common ground. It is about figuring out where people intersect in the most human of ways so that they might be able to set their differences aside and find some way to get along.

Greek and Romans would invite their enemies to the table to try to get to know them. They would feasts the “in modern times, Hillary Clinton is said to have ‘smart power’ to the table.” It was meant to include the notion of being smart about how you use power. Asking what could be left in our tools of diplomacy that may help us overcome audiences more effectively. Using food in a formal way in the field of public diplomacy. Employing chefs and bringing in new chefs to the table. Drawing on the power of the people who prepare food as a way of reaching out across the table.

Food is both fun and serious. It comes down to those who can eat and those who cannot eat. It is about war/peace, too much (obesity)/too little (malnourishment). We need to be cognizant that food can be used as a weapon and as a war mechanism.

A discussion of culinary diplomacy, gastrodiplomacy and conflict cuisine is essential to understanding the values and intentions behind everyday actions and how those values affect foreign policy.

DEFINING CULINARY DIPLOMACY

In the United States, culinary diplomacy is defined as the use of food or a cuisine as a tool to create a cross-cultural understanding in the hopes of improving interactions and cooperation. Hillary Clinton said this is the oldest form of diplomacy.

At the fiscal diplomatic level, there is, of course, the ceremony of state dinners; but there are also interpersonal connections, such as official state chefs exchanging recipes or engaging with traditionally secluded communities like the Amish. At the next level of public diplomacy, we see countries actively promoting their national cuisine such as Thailand did with their government-funded initiative, Global Thai. The United States is also utilizing cuisine through their American Chef Corps, which sends American chefs to foreign countries to cook and interact with the local population. The 2015 World Expo in Milan, Italy is focusing entirely on food and will offer an exciting opportunity for countries to brand themselves with their food.

Culinary diplomacy means to further diplomatic protocol through cuisine and it can take place at the citizen level. By eating at a diaspora restaurant and engaging with the owners or the community that frequents, we can employ a deeper level of understanding. World leaders can share meals, but it won’t create lasting peace. That has to happen at the citizen level, but it is becoming clear that using food as a means of engagement can produce important connections between nations and people.

THE ROLE OF GASTRODIPLOMACY

Bringing more than a decade of experience in the field of communication and public diplomacy to the discussion, Paul Rockower of Levantine Communications, is a leading expert in the burgeoning public diplomacy field of gastrodiplomacy. He delineated what gastrodiplomacy is and its role in the arena of diplomacy and cultural relations.

Rockower explained: “Gastrodiplomacy is the nexus of food and foreign policy and how countries communicate their culture through food. It is the use of restaurants as foreign cultural outposts. Gastrodiplomacy is how you communicate your culture through your food, how you reach out to a foreign audience and share your culture, history and hope through your food. It is the idea that the flag can follow the fork.”

Gastrodiplomacy is edible nation branding. For many years, it was middle powers, such as Thailand, Taiwan, Peru or South Korea that would practice gastrodiplomacy to create a larger nation brand for themselves and increase understanding for their culture. Recently, larger powers like the US and France practice gastrodiplomacy as well, but in a very different fashion. We see nuance and a focus on regional varieties and distinctions between cuisines.

The beauty of gastrodiplomacy is that it is a medium that inspires many people and empowers diaspora communities to share their traditions and cultures.

DEFINING GASTRODIPLOMACY

Sam Chapelle-Sokol, the culinary diplomacy consultant and culinary diplomat, participated in the discussion by video to provide a definition of the expanding field of culinary diplomacy.

Chapelle-Sokol presented: “Gastrodiplomacy is the use of food or a cuisine as a tool to create a cross-cultural understanding in the hopes of improving interactions and cooperation.”

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THE IMPORTANCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND FOOD SECURITY

With nearly 20 years of public and private sector experience in the science of health, nutrition, and food safety, Kimberly Reed, Executive Director, International Food Information Council Foundation brought the voice of the global food, beverage, and agricultural industry to the discussion. She expanded on the importance of environmental sustainability and food security to culinary diplomacy.

Reed detailed: “Expo Milano is the largest and most historical gathering on food for (sic) months in Italy. Theme: Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life, 144 countries are participating.”
which represent 94% of the world’s population. Each country will have a pavilion to showcase their own theme on how they plan to practice sustainability in the future. Biotechnology and food sustainability is important for the future of our planet. Why? In 2050 there will be 9.6 billion people on the planet who will need 70% more food than what we are producing today.

The American pavilion is designed to resemble a grain elevator and the exterior walls will be planted with vertical gardens from which acrobats will periodically harvest produce to serve as part of the meals available for consumption inside. Visitors will be able to experience a traditional American Thanksgiving dinner within the pavilion as well as an assortment of food trucks placed around the city of Milan.

The American pavilion focus is on American Food 2.0: United to Feed the Planet. Why American Food 2.0? Because the United States is intelligently and thoughtfully engaged in food and global food security and we want to be focusing on responsibility, the importance of international relationships, science and technology, nutrition and health, and culinary culture.

During the Q&A segment, audience members were given the opportunity to engage with the panelists on topics not covered in their presentations. Among the key issues raised was the importance of culinary authenticity, food fusion, and gastrodiplomacy and the private sector.

CULINARY AUTHENTICITY AND GASTRODIPLOMACY

The first question asked was how important authenticity of food to a culture when practicing gastrodiplomacy?

Paul Rockower explained: It is important to strike a balance between authenticity and accessibility. It would be difficult to serve spicy Indian food to American consumers who enjoy mild salsa. But there is a lot of room to play with the cuisine, such as fusion foods like Korean Tacos.

Tara Sonenshine pointed out: In this discussion drinks must also be considered, as well as food and the branding that accompanies wine. Cheers and toasts within our social customs are important. Cultural sensitivity around what we eat and drink has a positive and negative side of respecting peoples strongly held views about food and drink. For example the ongoing hummus debate between Arabs, Israelis, and Palestinians over who has the most authentic hummus. That is a healthy debate.

IS CULTURAL HYBRIDITY OF FOOD A FORM OF COLONIZATION OF CULTURE?

Another question introduced the idea of cultural hybridity or the blending of multiple cultures into something different and new and whether this is a form or colonization of culture?

There must be a balance between creating something familiar and being entrepreneurial. International chefs coming in and using local ingredients creates a notion of food experimentation, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Food is an open-minded field that dares to not always be exactly what you were looking for, explained Tara Sonenshine.

Kimberly Reed noted: There is a beauty of using traditional foods, but in this world there is room to explore and experiment.

CAN GASTRODIPLOMACY BE PERCEIVED AS TOO AGGRESSIVE BY THE PRIVATE SECTOR?

An audience member asked when gastrodiplomacy is practiced by the private sector can it be perceived as too aggressive? Is there a tightrope to be walked between respecting a culture that already exists and bringing the American experience abroad?

Paul Rockower explained: Gastrodiplomacy is a little bit different from the private sector. Starbucks is not an actor in gastrodiplomacy because they are a private company expanding to new territories whereas gastrodiplomacy is a government initiative to educate foreign populations on the nuances of a country’s food and culture.

WITH FOOD FUSION, WHICH CULTURE CAN LAY CLAIM TO THE NEW CREATION?

As fusion cooking has become an increasingly utilized element of the culinary landscape, one audience member asked, for creations that are a mixture of different cultures, which gets to lay claim to the new creation? For example, who owns Korean Tacos?

Paul Rockower declared: Both cultures should take ownership and recognize what stems from each culture because these mixtures and new creations are more interesting as a marriage between cultures.

DOES FOOD BUILD PEACE OR DRIVE CONFLICT?

Yael Luttwak
President & CEO of Slimpeace and Films
Christine Fair
Associate, The New School, and Author of Cooking in the Axis of Evil
Manolia Charlotin
Director, Feet in Two Worlds Program, The New School
Roger-Mark De Souza
Director of Population, Environmental Security, and Resilience, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
Moderator
Louis Goodman, Dean Emeritus, School of International Service, American University
DOES FOOD BUILD PEACE OR DRIVE CONFLICT

Food cannot be separated from the human experience. Access to food and water are essential to human survival. When food is scarce it can become a source of conflict. Withholding of food has also become a tactic of war, with starvation of enemies as a means of repression. Sharing food has also been a way that people can communicate by sitting around a table and breaking bread. Food has become a tool for driving both peace and conflict, depending on how it is utilized. Food can be a powerful tool for educating and humanizing conflicts. The foods we eat in this country and around the world are reflections of history and culture food. The globalization of the palette has also served as a platform for understanding discord over larger political issues. Food brings a cultural vibrance to a community by serving as a means of integration of new immigrant groups. But we also know that food insecurity even in this age of plenty can be a major force for inducing local conflicts.

“If you want to bring people together and think about what people have in common, how they can come together, or celebrate the kinds of struggles that diaspora peoples go through to build their lives in a new place, food is a wonderful place to do that,” said Louis Goodman.

A discussion of food as a place for peace or conflict is essential to understanding the role food plays in building community, economic empowerment, and effective development policies.

THE ROLE OF FOOD IN HUMANIZING ISSUES

The discussion opened with a presentation from Yael Luttwak, Filmmaker and President & CEO of Slimpeace, a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering women to improve their eating habits and adopt a healthy lifestyle through a group support system run by certified facilitators. Showing a clip from her film, A Slim Peace, and offering brief remarks, Luttwak demonstrated how food can be a powerful tool for humanizing issues of conflict and culture even in the most intractable of conflicts.

Luttwak remarked: A Slim Peace is a film about a weight loss group amidst the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the end of the Second Intifada in 2005. Members of this weight loss group were chosen from Israelis, Palestinians, Jews, Christians, Muslims, settlers, and Bedouin women. For several weeks, these women came together to discuss their weight loss issues, dieting issues, and nutritional issues. Through the process of a health education program, they were able to meet the other as a human being. The most inspiring result of this process was that eventually the women started to connect with the humanizing aspects, disregarding the toxic political divisions that should have caused the group to splinter. Despite immense political changes, the women continued to meet and form bonds with one another.

After the film was presented at various film festivals, Dame Mary Blaire reached out and urged the creation of more chapters of Slimpeace. At present, there are thirty cohorts, or weight loss groups, in the Middle East and ten in the United States, including a teen cohort in Portland, Maine. These groups use food as a tool to build confidence, to help integrate newcomers to communities, and also through sharing of experiences around eating find common ground for coexistence.

“Food is a very powerful, personal thing. If there are reasons that you want to point out that there is injustice and get people thinking around conflict, you can go with food.”

–Louis Goodman
American University
School of International Service
Dean Emeritus

DECONSTRUCTING THE RELATIONSHIPS AND POLITICS OF FOOD

For Christine Fair, Associate Professor, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, and author of Cooking in the Axis of Evil: Food is a battlefield. Who you eat with and what you eat is defined by your religion, gender and status. She brought to the discussion a look at the politics of food and the power relationships behind cooking.

Fair explained: In South Asia, who you eat with depends largely on who you are and what social group you fall into. Often different religious communities will not eat with each other and different genders will almost never break bread at the same time. Although women are the primary producers of food in these cultures, they are expected to serve the men first and then content with the leftovers. For me, food is not the opportunity for kumbaya, it is the opportunity to express these, often primordial, divisions.

How many of these cuisines reflect imperialism, colonialism, slavery, or other politics of history? It is impossible to separate cuisine from the political backdrop from which it originates. For example, the food that we traditionally think of as Caribbean food is largely influenced by the North Atlantic slave trade and the large presence of Chinese restaurants in America is due to the Chinese workers in the railroad industry.

Food is an important part of diaspora culture, as people will lose their language but they will not lose their food.

FOOD AND COMMUNITY

As a multimedia journalist and strategist with experiences in print, broadcast, and online publications, as well as a deep understanding of the Haitian-American community, Manolia Charlotin, Director, Feet in Two Worlds Program, The New School brought a unique voice of diaspora communities to the discussion. Charlotin presented a short video produced by Feet in Two Worlds that highlights the resistance and often discrimination that many street vendors in New York – largely women immigrants – are facing and their made remarks on how immigrants build a new life and a new community through food.
For anyone who has ever read a cookbook, moved, and talked about food with continentals might not actually using food bring a new level of understanding. To complement the conference’s lively discussions, the Diaspora Chefs produced a luncheon of their native cuisines. Guests at the conference tasted the cuisines of Vietnam, Thailand, Ethiopia, Lebanon, and El Salvador. The luncheon allowed attendees to interact with the chefs and experience for themselves how food drives connections and conversations.
ALBUM OF THE DIASPORA CHEFS IN THE NATION’S CAPITOL LUNCHEON

TASTING CONFLICT CUISINES: A CONVERSATION WITH DIASPORA CHEFS

Benjamin Velasquez
Chef Sonia Gutierrez Center, Carlos Rosario Charter School

Mariano Ramos
Chef Sonia Gutierrez Center, Carlos Rosario Charter School

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Tim Lehmkuhl, Washington Post Food Writer

Photo Credit: Sophia Pappalardo
Chef Carlos Cesario: I moved to DC 15 years ago. There were not many Venezuelan restaurants. Today there are many. The number of people who come to eat your food are the people from that place. It takes time for it to become popular in the general population. When Venezuela expanded its oil production, the country became a melting pot. The oil economy attracted so many different nationalities. The country's cuisine reflected the fusion of many different cultures from the Americas and elsewhere. Because of this, there are not many true Venezuelan dishes. The main ingredient that is traditionally Venezuelan would be the dough for the arepas, or Venezuelan pupusas, a corn-bread dough which you can now find at any supermarket.

Tim Carman: It is easier to go to another country and find a receptive audience for your cuisine or is it easier to promote your cuisine within your own country?

Sileshi Alifom: Within the Ethiopian market, it is already saturated. When you start another restaurant, the first people that come to eat your food are the people from that place. It takes time for it to become popular in the general population. When Venezuela expanded its oil production, the country became a melting pot. The oil economy attracted so many different nationalities. The country's cuisine reflected the fusion of many different cultures from the Americas and elsewhere. Because of this, there are not many true Venezuelan dishes. The main ingredient that is traditionally Venezuelan would be the dough for the arepas, or Venezuelan pupusas, a corn-bread dough which you can now find at any supermarket.

TASTING CONFLICT CUISINES: A CONVERSATION WITH DIASPORA CHEFS

Chefs are the vital center of the discussion on the kitchen as the new venue for foreign policy, yet they are often a hidden voice. Their impact can be tasted in every dish but they are behind the scenes influence --- in the kitchen doing the hard work of cooking the food that tells the story of their culture and their experiences.

In a discussion led by Tim Carman, Washington Post Staff Food Writer, who has made a reputation as Washington’s ambassador of ethnic food, three diaspora chefs and a restaurateur examine how they use their cultural influence to connect people to their culture and their food.

Tim Carman, Moderator, began the discussion by asking each chef to share what brought them to the United States and what got them into food?

Chef Carlos Cesario, Q Caterers: It actually was conflict that brought me to the United States – my family didn’t want me to come. I was an architect in Venezuela. During a semester abroad in Belgium, and traveling around Europe, I became interested in food. Building your own plate is a type of architecture in itself. I had the opportunity to apply for an architectural job but ended up getting one in cooking. I had a very good teacher; she was the assistant to Roland Mesnier, the White House pastry chef. Working in that type of international and American high end cuisine helped me to expand my horizons into other types of cuisine – particularly Mediterranean and Asian – and later to open my own business as a caterer. The catering business is always a learning experience about the mix of different ingredients and cuisines.

Chef Mariano Ramos, Columbia Heights, DC: I grew up in El Salvador. I always wanted to be a lawyer and I worked at a courthouse. In a conflict region, being a young person is a crime. Communist guerrillas were hunting young people, and the government was recruiting them. by force. My only choice was to flee. We had to migrate illegally. Going north to the United States, I was the best choice. On my own and I had to survive – a fundamental immigrant experience – I took a job as a dishwasher. Promoted to assistant prep cook, worker my way through the positions of line cook, shift supervisor, sous chef, chef, to trainer. That’s how I got into serving people in the food service industry. However, due to limited English, I was training people that would eventually become my boss. I attended a culinary school for three years, where I realized that culinary arts and food was the largest industry in the world. It’s the only industry that never drinks.

Sileshi Alifom: From the age of 14, I’ve been an Ethiopian by birth. I came to the United States in 1975 to go to school. Nothing to do with food service. I attended SUNY New Paltz. During that time I was recruited by Marriott, I moved to California to basically work as a caterer. A food person in general. I first job with Marriott was a banquet manager. At that time I really got into the food. Since then I came to America, I’ve worked as a waiter or a dishwasher, or something in the food industry. What I appreciated most was pleasing people, seeing people smiling, and hearing how good the service and food was. I retired after 22 years with Marriott. I decided to do something different and I longed to move to the restaurant business in Washington DC by purchasing a restaurant called Dell’s in Georgetown. I transformed it into an establishment for high-end Ethiopian cuisine. My mindset was to share Ethiopian cuisine with everyone. I believe that restaurants are about wanting to talk with people to engage with people, and to educate them on food that they’ve never had before.

Chef Benjamin Velasquez, Sonja Gutierrez Center, Carlos Rosario Charter School, Washington, DC: I love American customers. It doesn’t matter what you give them, they never complain, they never give you back, and they pay the bill with tip. People who are familiar to an Ethiopian restaurant before, because she doesn’t know what experience. The best customer is the person who has never been to an Ethiopian restaurant before. Because she doesn’t know what experience is all about the hand of the chef who is making the food. The most unique aspect of this experience is that Ethiopians eat with their hands, and for some people it is very difficult. The hands are the integral part of the eating. It’s to personally talk to people to make sure they really understand what is eating and how it’s made.

Chef Mariano Ramos: Mexican cuisine’s popularity today has a lot of its presence due to the availability of ingredients. Authentic Mexican food items, from the indigenous roots. As this cuisine moved north and entered the American diet, it’s the main ingredient that has helped push it into the mainstream. What helped push it into the mainstream? What helped, push it into the mainstream?

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TASTING CONFLICT CUISINES: A CONVERSATION WITH TIM CARMAN

Chef Mariano Ramos: Preparing food must take into account the market. It is also about doing a bit with what social class you’re taking your food to. For example, if you’re trying to sell food in Mexico in a street cart, you have to compete against all the other vendors who have already made it. If I were to go back to my own country, I would have to reinvent myself because of the classical French technique and American style I’ve learned, as well as the Mexican palate. I would be well positioned to use the strengths I developed in the United States to create new things.

Chef Benjamin Velasquez: Promoting a country’s cuisine also depends on what is happening in the region. The conflict in El Salvador and the large migration to the United States made Salvadorans one of the largest colonies of immigrants in the Washington metropolitan area in the 1980s. Those who fled the civil war worked in the area so that they could send money back to their families. Many people in El Salvador wanted to be Americans because of the freedoms and higher standard of living of this country. Now, twenty years since the fighting stopped in El Salvador there are about 20 different culinary academies, which have opened in the last six years, making it the biggest country in Central America with culinary education.

Tim Carman asked the final question: Can the authenticity of a cuisine be preserved when a cuisine moves from one country to another?

Chef Mariano Ramos: Does it matter if it is authentic? What separates us from any other species in the world is that we use fire to cook, and we all use it. How a group of people has interpreted the flame and used products that are geographically available to them is what makes the study of food and cuisine interesting. The definition of cooking is heat applied for a certain amount of time through some sort of medium on a set of ingredients. Cooking techniques, technology, and the ingredients come together forming the food culture of the country. When food moves from one culture to the next, the cooking techniques come with them, what changes are the ingredients. When it comes to bringing these cultures to another country, certain restrictions in technology or tools can make traditional techniques impossible. For example, you cannot cook food underground and serve it to customers in the United States. However, you can use a tandoor, and use the Mexican knowledge of ingredients and flavor to make a similar cuisine. We need to embrace change to grow.

Sileshi Aliform: The making of the traditional bread, the injera, depends on jeff flour. For a long time you could not grow this in the United States, so it takes multiple ingredients to imitate the same product. This causes it to be heavier and no longer gluten-free. But this innovation is what makes cuisine interesting! Today, the United States is growing the teff grass in Michigan and Idaho, making this important food product available to the large Ethiopian communities around the United States.
CULINARY DIPLOMATS AND NATION BRANDING

DC’s changing culinary landscape illustrates how food is a reflection of culture and an increasingly essential tool for diplomatic engagement. Forty years ago, the only ethnic cuisine to be found in the nation’s capital was Chinese and Mexican and neither was an authentic representation of the native cuisines. Today, DC offers a vibrant diversity of cuisine and celebrity chefs, which has strengthened the city’s own cultural fabric. Cold War conflicts produced the diaspora, starting with Viet Nam to the current immigrants from Iraq and Syria. These people opened up the community to the tastes and smells of their homelands. They also opened restaurants to offer a platform for showcasing a culture’s cuisine and a chef’s perspective, as well as better telling the story of a national culture. For the diplomatic corps, the new cuisines of Washington provide a compelling venue for engagement on their individual cultures and politics.

A discussion of how food is utilized by diplomats and who can also serve as culinary ambassadors is vital in understanding how cuisine defines a culture and its role in international relations.

CHEFS AS GASTRODIPLOMATS

As Head of Public Diplomacy at the Embassy of Peru in Washington, DC, First Secretary Adriana Velarde launched the discussion by speaking on the unique culinary brand of Peru and its public diplomacy initiatives employed to promote the brand abroad.

Velarde noted Peru’s unique brand and national identity is vital to the national culture because Peruvians view themselves as a fusion of cultures that have blended many regional tastes to create a new flavor. Peru has started an initiative to increase the reputation of Peruvian cuisine. Their chefs are now recognized as gastronomic diplomats. This is especially relevant as there are often one or two Peruvian restaurants in most major cities in America. This was not the case twenty years ago. Each chef that prepares his national cuisine abroad is a gastronomic representative of his country.

Peru is receiving rising prominence as a major food travel destination. Peru was recently voted the best culinary destination. Peru is receiving rising prominence as a major food travel destination. Peru was recently voted the best culinary destination. Peru was recently voted the best culinary destination.

The rise of Peruvian cuisine as a central feature of Peruvian public diplomacy also demonstrates the power of food to transform a country’s negative image. In the early 1990s, Peru was plagued by an internal guerrilla force that terrorized the population. Sendersismo was feared, with tourism declining because of the insecurity caused by these armed rebel groups. Today, with the end of that conflict, Peru has transformed itself into a center for regional Latin American cooking. It uses its chefs to promote the natural resources of indigenous crops such as quinoa. And Peru has been skilful in promoting its own ethnic Diasporas as part of the mix that makes for modern Andean cooking. This includes the cuisines of Japan and China that are now integrated into the diets of so many residents of the country.

FOOD AS A VITAL TOOL OF DIPLOMACY

Having previously served as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Ambassador David Killion, Senate Chief of Staff, U.S. Commission on Security Cooperation in Europe, contributed anecdotes of the obstacles and successes he faced while serving on the frontlines of cultural diplomacy in Paris.

Killion detailed: Culture is the currency at UNESCO. The delegates at UNESCO expected to be entertained. Therefore, American cuisine could be a great weapon for the U.S. delegation. As the U.S. Ambassador to UNESCO, I insisted that people enjoy the openness of American cuisine, including the openness of American cuisine.

Committing to providing the “homey” food that my wife and I love about America, we encountered one major problem: French chefs, rather than exporting an American chef, the State Department hires chefs from the local population. This was difficult to explain persuasively. There, or even blackmail (the chefs to cook the tasting (and often messy) American comfort food that we wanted to serve at official events. The chefs’ professionalism and capabilities gave them very clear ideas of the types of food served at official events and neither fried chicken nor hamburgers made the cut. However, once the chefs were finally convinced to try American cuisine, the results were a rousing success. The egitarian food put people at ease, and created a much more pleasant environment, one conducive to diplomacy and cooperation.

A CULINARY MOSAIC THAT BRIDGES DIVIDES AND CONNECTS COMMUNITIES

Although she launched her career in Washington as a political analyst, Patricia Jirich gave up being a policy wonk to pursue her love of food. She is a cooking teacher, food writer, and Social Chef of the Mexican Cultural Institute in Washington, DC. She is a culinary ambassador that has promoted the best of Mexican cuisine. Having grown up in a diverse culture, Jirich brought to the discussion ideas on what is authentic cuisine and how food bridges divides and connects communities.

Jirich explained: Mexico struggles to define its identity and to blend each aspect into a cohesive “Mexican cuisine.” Visiting Cuba a year ago, I was incredibly disappointed with the asphyxiation that has strangled their cuisine. With the decades long embargo, Cubans can’t even purchase the groceries to make their traditional dishes. There is a loss of tradition and culture that will hopefully be revived with future trade relations.

It is a situation I keep in mind when people ask: “What is authentic Mexican?” People rarely think I can answer that question. Before appearing on the TV show of Paula Deen, the Southern chef looked at me and said, “You don’t look Mexican at all.” After I assured her that I was born and raised there. Deen questioned, “What is that last name? Jewish?” While I understand people’s confusion over the diversity of Mexican culture, I am 100% Mexican.

One model that helps to envision Mexican history and culture is to picture it as a loom. The different cultures come together to weave different colors and textures together. Does your country have a cuisine that can withstand the changes of time? Do you have basic ingredients and traditions that have been passed down through generations? Although many people see Mexican cuisine as a mixture of indigenous and Spanish cultures, there is also a long tradition of Asian culture, which is often overlooked due to cultural prejudices, as well as French and Asian. They are all threads of Mexican culture, but there is something that makes it Mexican. Once you lose the fear of knowing that now food is global, the borders are porous, you can recognize that something Mexican, not because a Mexican made it but because there is the love and purity of intentions.

McNair expounded: Focusing on health, hunger, workforce development, and social enterprise, the World Central Kitchen works to empower impoverished and hungry communities to act as a catalyst for change in the lives of people. One recent project is expanding an orphanage in Haiti to be self-sustaining. A tilapia farm and chicken huts have been installed, from which the orphans can raise revenue from selling excess food. Clean cook stoves have been installed that require little to no charcoal to cook. In addition, a bakery has been built to teach the children a trade as well as provide their daily bread. The chefs of the World Central Kitchen seek to provide a holistic approach to smart solutions for hunger. This is especially important in cultures where access to food has been a defining part of the nation’s history.
Why are stories a defining component of conflict cuisine? Stories were woven throughout presentations, in each segment of the conference and whether told by immigrant chefs or of streets vendors, many of the stories noted that some form of hunger drove a need to use food as a means of communication, as a form of personal expression. These stories are not only about hunger, but also about survival and resilience. Immigrants to come to America are all about surviving. Food becomes a means of earning a living but also a way of connecting people back to their homelands.

To conclude the day’s events, Dr. Johanna Mendelson Forman, Scholar-in-Residence, School of International Service, American University, Washington, DC had a one-on-one conversation with Nikki Silva, co-host, The Kitchen Sisters; and Producer, NPR’s Hidden Kitchens, on the essential role of stories in defining conflict cuisine and building awareness by the public and policymakers of the key issues that comprise conflict cuisine.

FOOD AS A CONVERSATION STARTER

The discussion began with Nikki Silva noting that one way to start a conversation about food is to ask, “What did you have for breakfast today?”

Silva explained: Asking this non-threatening question is the easiest way to loosen people up because it is a question everyone knows the answer to. It can open people up to conversation in a way you might never expect.

One of the first pieces I did for the Hidden Kitchen series on National Public Radio was about the George Forman grill. My partner Davia Nelson and I found that it has become an underground kitchen for homeless people and new immigrants to the country. There are people who hide the grill under their beds because they live in apartments where they are not allowed to cook or don’t have kitchens, and there are homeless who plug the grill straight into a streetlight for electricity. As part of the story, I interviewed George Forman to see if he knew how the grill was being used. He was astonished. That surprising start to a conversation led him to share his own story of growing up hungry in Houston, Texas. He recalled that when the other children in school would go in for lunch and he couldn’t afford to have any. Instead of buying lunch for 25 cents, he would blow up a paper bag to look full and take it into the lunchroom to throw away to pretend he had eaten that day. He then spoke about how ‘hunger makes you angry.’ As a young kid he turned to the streets robbing people. What pulled him out of this angry place was the Job Corps. Later when he lived with a family in Seattle he noticed he was eating every meal as if it were his last until he realized ‘I’m going to have three meals a day no matter what.’

USING FOOD TO CHANGE PERCEPTIONS

Silva noted that the conference included a wonderful fusion of academics, chefs, and storytellers, and was truly struck by the unexpected stories that came up, such as the histories of street vendors. This fusion with storytelling is the way to ignite the message of conflict cuisine to reach the masses.

Mendelson Forman pointed out in countries that had experienced internal conflicts such as Peru it was important to see how food had helped create a transformation in the public perception of a once war-torn society. She detailed: Since the end of the guerrilla movement, Sendero Luminoso, Peru has created a new persona as a culinary destination. It was moving to hear an earlier panelist talk of travelling back to Peru, and who was in tears describing this transition from a conflict torn nation to a place that people were clamoring to visit. For Peru this new image has called attention to a very important cultural heritage that includes making the potatoes an indigenous crop of the Andes and quinoa, a central part of the new Andean cuisine. You get passion when people recognize that food is a bond.

Silva’s storytelling format of collecting and sharing information about poverty, hunger, and access to food that we all need to be well-informed, said Mendelson Forman. Silva responded: People tend to turn their ears off when hearing about homelessness or conflict, and access to food that we all need to be well-informed, said Mendelson Forman. Silva responded: People tend to turn their ears off when hearing about homelessness or conflict, and access to food that we all need to be well-informed, said Mendelson Forman. People tend to turn their ears off when hearing about homelessness or conflict, and access to food that we all need to be well-informed, said Mendelson Forman.

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A CLOSING CONVERSATION: THE KITCHEN AS THE NEW VENUE OF FOREIGN POLICY?

Tara Sonenshine: Professor, George Washington, University, and former Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy. She is the former Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs for the Department of State and previously served as the Executive Vice President of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). Ms. Sonenshine served in various capacities at the White House during the Clinton Administration, including Transition Director, Director of Foreign Policy Planning for the National Security Council, and Special Advisor to the President and Deputy Director of Communications. Prior to serving in the Clinton Administration, Ms. Sonenshine was an Executive Producer of ABC News Nightline, where she worked for fourteen years. She was also an off-air reporter at the Pentagon for ABC’s World News Tonight and the recipient of 20 News Diamond Awards for coverage of international affairs.

Paul Rockower, Longtime Communications

Kimberly Reed, Executive Director, International Food Information Council

In the final question of the conversation, Mendelson Forman asked if food will become a national security issue?

Silva responded: Food is already a national security issue. And the conversation we began today through this conference underscores the reality. Access to food is essential to survival. Today it is, in the interest of the United States to ensure that no matter how conflictive a place exists food will be important to the stabilization of any civilization. Beyond being people together, food must be considered a tool of peace building by providing for the needs of those affected by conflict.

A CLOSING CONVERSATION: THE KITCHEN AS THE NEW VENUE OF FOREIGN POLICY?

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A CLOSING CONVERSATION: THE KITCHEN AS THE NEW VENUE OF FOREIGN POLICY?

Johanna Mendelson Forman, Scholar-in-Residence, School of International Service, American University

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PEOPLE SPEAKERS IN ORDEA OF APPEARANCE

C. Christine Fair is an Associate Professor at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service. She specializes in International Organizations and State Department Operations. Mr. Killion was named a Senior Professional Staff member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in 2009. He served as the Committee’s top expert on International Organizations and Corporate Relations, and was the Permanent Representative of the United States to UNESCO with the rank of Ambassador on June 25, 2009 by President Barack Obama.

Adriana Velarde holds a deep understanding of U.S. foreign policy, having previously served in the United States Foreign Service Department in the Department of State, in the bureau of Legislative Affairs and on the White House Domestic Council. She has also served as Ambassador to Afghanistan, the Philippines, and Peru.

Brian has worked in development in over 20 countries and on determinants of success for several successful thrill-ride operators. He has researched and tested thrill-ride attractions in China, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Singapore.

Chef Carlos Cesario brings an international flair to Washington’s culinary scene. He studied urban planning, with an emphasis in the Art Nouveau movement of the early 20th century, while attending the Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Today, Chef Cesario has established himself as one of the most exciting professional asian chefs in the United States. He is the author of his first book, “Chef de Cuisine.”

Mariano Ramos, Culinary Arts Instructor, for Carlos Rosario International Charter School-Sonia Gutierrez Campus, brings a world of experience in cooking and hospitality and food and beverage industry. He has resided and worked in different countries.

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ABOUT
CONFLICT
CUISINE®

Conflict Cuisine® began as a course at American University’s School of International Service, which looked at how food of the diaspora communities in Washington reflected the state of conflicts around the globe. The course also examined why food is a form of Smart Power, but could also be a driver of conflict even in the 21st century. Through this course we have a grown a lively discussion on why in zones of conflict food becomes central to both survival and resilience. We have also recognized the power of food to create dialogue among communities who come to the United States by providing not only sustenance but also understanding of the diverse cultural roots that have created new tastes and appetites in the American palate.

For more information on the program, recent press, and upcoming events, visit: conflictcuisine.com

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