



**IMMIGRANTS' TRAVELING FOODS:
COOKING MEMORIES OF LOVE AND TRADITION**

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The purpose of this article is to document a community-based research project using oral history methods to study immigrants' culinary practices and food traditions. With funding from the CUNY Diversity Projects Development Fund, this project allowed immigrants (mostly residents of Queens) to experience their own "telling" by retracing the culinary practices they have maintained, modified, and passed along to their communities through time. One of our main research questions was: How are traditional foods sustained and transformed in order to preserve immigrants' cultures of origin in urban milieus?

A related, and key, goal of this project was to provide opportunities for undergraduate students to utilize oral history — a method aimed at collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the past through participants' voices and personal experiences — for the purpose of documenting the culinary traditions of diverse immigrant communities in Queens. To that end, Queens College undergraduate students who enrolled in the Fall 2012 Social Research Methods course, and in the Spring 2013 Senior Seminar on Immigration Research, contributed to the IRB-approved research project entitled *Immigrant Oral Histories: Healing Traditions and Nostalgic Foods Project*.

Professor Anahí Viladrich (QC Sociology) and Natalie Milbrodt (Director, Queens Memory Program) trained a total of twenty-nine students in oral history methods, in-depth interviewing, non-obtrusive procedures, and recording techniques (i.e., creating and archiving

audiovisual materials). These tools offered a unique experiential learning opportunity for students who gained hands-on practice in diverse research methods, and then became a team of novice oral history researchers. As part of their class projects, students engaged their families — as well as members of their local communities — then becoming prime sources of information about immigrant culinary traditions.

The study results yielded interviews with individuals belonging to different immigrant and ethnic communities. Nineteen of those subjects were born in a variety of countries: El Salvador, Cyprus, Poland, Germany, Greece, Mexico, Russia, Pakistan, Italy, Colombia, Kosovo, Trinidad, Haiti, Guyana and Ecuador. The other ten subjects were USA-born, including Puerto Rico, as well as from the Dominican Republic and Europe. Jewish, Hindu, and Catholic traditions relating to food were also discussed in some of the interviews.

Despite participants' diverse origins and their distinctive culinary habits, the content of the interviews highlighted the importance of their traditional foods as a vehicle for conveying the emotional and ethnic attachment to their countries of origin, while also recreating a community in the diaspora. Study participants pointed out the importance of eating familiar foods as a catalyst for strengthening their feelings of comradeship with their peers during ethnic celebrations and national or religious holidays. This was particularly the case among those whose close ties with their compatriots emerged in the absence of family members in the USA, and with whom they would have otherwise shared their (often labor-intensive) traditional culinary customs.

A Grand Finale: A Virtual and Multi-media Exhibit

In the spring of 2014, the project hosted a multi-media exhibit on immigrants' food practices and gastronomic traditions. The event was conceived as an interactive installation in which study participants were able to share their views and provide feedback. The exhibit included both a virtual display (e.g., computerized access to interviews) and a physical installation of students' research results. The Citi Center for Culture graciously donated a public gallery space located in the Court Square building (Long Island City), as well as printing and mounting services. The central location of this venue was conducive for attendance by a large number of neighbors from Queens and other boroughs, who greatly contributed to disseminating

the findings drawn from the project. On April 1, 2014, a special reception hosted by the Citi Center for Culture officially welcomed the project into the Citi Building, bringing together a myriad of community members, project participants, and students. Queens College, Queens Library, and the Citi Center for Culture worked closely together to make this event an outstanding success.

Giving back to the community

Choosing immigrants' food histories and culinary practices provided students and participants with a unique lens to highlight the ethnic legacies that continue to inform the cultural traditions of Queens's diverse communities. This project purposely allowed interviewees' rich voices to be heard by conveying personal interpretations of their cultural, national, and religious legacies concerning their eating and food practices. Students' interviews are now part of a public record located in the Queens College Library's Department of Special Collections and Archives, which are being stored in a special digital gallery: <https://goo.gl/NXWcvU>

This gallery can be easily accessed by scholars and students, as well as anyone from the general public who is interested in learning about the thriving diversity of our borough and city. For educators interested in learning more about the materials and methods Viladrich and Milbrodt used in the classroom, they can visit <https://goo.gl/8TYX4c>

Ultimately, this project solidified a model of experiential learning based on community-based research opportunities, which allowed underrepresented voices to travel into the public realm and beyond academic and archival research audiences. We hope that this learning and teaching experience will become a benchmark for future community-based collaborations, especially those engaging Queens/CUNY undergraduate students.