

## Exploring Evolving Moroccan Identities in the Diaspora

SUE SAMUELSON AWARD FOR  
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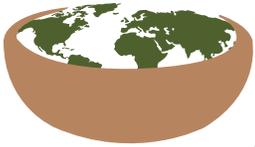
By: M. Ruth Dike

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### Introduction

Moving to a new country can have a profound impact on the way people think about themselves, their home country, and their culture. Immigrants experience a push and pull between the new culture they are being exposed to and the traditional culture of their homeland. Food can serve as a way to reinforce ethnic identity for immigrants. One of my informants, Abdel (pseudonym), spoke particularly eloquently about why he believes that Moroccans in America are exceptionally attached to their cuisine and tradition: “When you are away from home, you try to associate with anything that will bring you closer to home. That’s why we [stick] with the cooking; we try to keep the tradition” (Naifeh 2012). While Abdel’s view is not shared by all of my informants, it expresses the importance of food for many Moroccan Bostonians. In this article I investigate challenges faced, and some solutions sought, by Moroccans living in Boston in fall 2012 who want to keep their Moroccan traditions alive through foodways. Building on an earlier study of Moroccan cuisine I conducted over four months in Rabat, Morocco, in spring 2011 (Dike 2012), I explore evolving Moroccan Bostonian identity through food. My questions include: Is Moroccan cuisine an important aspect of Bostonian Moroccans’ cultural identity? What are the challenges and solutions to cooking Moroccan cuisine in America? Has the Moroccan community blended Moroccan and American dishes or modified Moroccan recipes, and for what reasons? How do the thoughts and food practices of first and second generation immigrants compare? I examine how and why Moroccan foodways are changing in the new North American context.

Although I could not find hard census data, most Moroccans I spoke with estimated there to be approximately 10,000 Moroccans living in the Boston area. The majority



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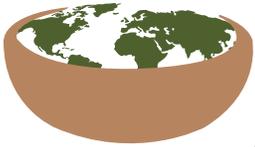
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resides north of the city in Medford, Malden, Everett, and Revere (see Figure 1). Women and families do immigrate, but there are a disproportionate number of single men represented in the Moroccan Bostonian population, perhaps because they are among the first generation immigrating to the United States in great numbers. Since the mid-twentieth century, a significant number of Moroccans immigrated to the United States in pursuit of undergraduate, graduate, medical and professional degrees. More recently, the congressionally mandated Diversity Immigrant Visa program (commonly known as the Green Card Lottery) has dramatically increased the number of Moroccan immigrating to the United States (Koury 2012). Although Moroccans who win the Green Card Lottery are not always as educated as previous immigrants, they frequently finish their studies in the United States, after starting out as taxi drivers and food service workers.

## Methodology

To study Moroccan Bostonian foodways, I used a range of ethnographic techniques over the course of three months including participant observation, semi-structured interviews (with projective techniques), food mapping, written food logs, photographs and analysis of restaurant menus. For the purpose of this study, I narrowed my focus to only Moroccans (who I considered to be anyone who self-identifies as Moroccan). I undertook participant observation as a customer at two Moroccan restaurants, two Halal (a religious term used for Islam's dietary restrictions governing what one should and should not eat, similar to the kosher classification in Judaism) markets, one bakery, and three cafés associated with Morocco. I conducted more than ten hours of semi-structured interviews with ten Moroccan informants. All except one—Youssef Boujabit—preferred to remain anonymous and they are identified here by pseudonyms. I asked each of them numerous questions and showed pictures I took of food in Morocco prompting them to identify and describe the food. This projective technique (Fetterman 2010:59) proved particularly revealing. The individuals I interviewed ranged from twenty-six to fifty-eight years old and the amount of time each informant has spent in the United States ranged from one to twenty-two years (see Figure 2). All the informants, except one, have some college education as well as stable jobs. They include five single males, two single females, one divorced female, one widowed female and one married female. I had the opportunity to have one formal interview with a co-owner of a Moroccan restaurant and conducted shorter informal interviews with a co-owner of a Moroccan bakery. Unfortunately I was unable to interview a second-generation Moroccan over the age of eighteen, likely because the majority of Moroccans have only recently immigrated



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to Boston and do not fall in this age group. However, I was able to interview two Moroccans with children and observe Moroccans with children at a café and bakery.

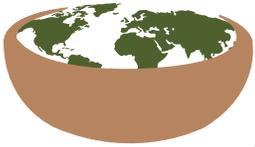
It is important to note that my informants do not represent the Moroccan population as a whole; that they were financially able to immigrate denotes a level of upper-middle class status in Moroccan society. While Vallianatos and Raine (2008) explain that in Canada immigrants frequently have poor socioeconomic opportunities available because they do not speak the language and their foreign credentials are not recognized, my educated informants fit into the middle to upper middle class category. Perhaps related to this, all but one informant are fluent in English and were born and raised in urban spaces.

## Findings

In general, the definition of Moroccan cuisine shared by informants in Boston matched the definition of informants in my earlier study in Morocco (Dike 2012) and Moroccan food is an important part of Moroccan culture in both Boston and Rabat. Both groups stressed the use of spices in Moroccan cuisine, the importance of bread to soak up sauce with every dish, and the regional differences in cuisine across Morocco. This said, Moroccan Bostonians placed significantly more emphasis on the importance of seasonally appropriate meals than people I interviewed in Morocco, probably because of the stark lack of seasonal variety in America.

Bombarded with the chaos of moving to another country, food can serve as an anchor to a distant homeland for immigrants. Due to the importance of ethnic cuisine to identity, it can be a particularly illuminating lens through which to explore ethnicity (Griehop 2006, Nicolaou, et al 2009, Rabinowska 2010, Vallianatos & Raine 2008). Mehta highlights the importance of food to an immigrant population, stating, “Sharing a meal becomes an act of repossession to maintain a sense of wholeness while imposing order in a disempowering world through the structuring force of rituals” (2005:31). In the context of studying two novels, Mehta argues that immigrant food can provide order in an otherwise senseless world for Caribbean and North African immigrants living in France. Marte makes a similar claim that the immigrant situation can be filled with “uncertainty, displacement, and struggle for survival” (2011:181).

While my informants have many varied feelings and opinions about Moroccan cuisine, everyone reported that they enjoy Moroccan food and many declared they love it and/or are proud of it. Some indicated that preparing traditional Moroccan food and buying



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products from Morocco can be an especially comforting way to create a sense of home in America. For example, Abdel describes the meaning he finds in Moroccan products:

See, people have the choice sometimes, but they would rather go buy things from the Arab store, just to be in the Moroccan store... like sometimes we buy things that we do not need. For example [there are] some cookies here [that] are better, but you see cookies that you were [used to] getting [in Morocco], even though you [know] they don't taste that great, but [you] just to have [to buy them] (Naifeh 2012).

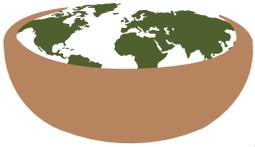
Food is an important way for Abdel to connect with his Moroccan identity, to “bring [his former] home here” at the same time he also embraces his new home in America. In this way, some Moroccan Americans may be accused of trying to be more traditional than Moroccans in Morocco because they feel the need to be close to their culture in the context of America.

Half of the informants listed Italian foods among their favorites while others described a preference for French, Mexican, American, Japanese, Indian, Spanish, European, Asian, Thai, Chinese, Indonesian, and/or Malaysian cuisines. However, eight out of ten informants named Moroccan as one of, if not their only, favorite food. When asked why she preferred Moroccan food, twenty-seven year-old Fatima replied “...because I grew up eating it...so I don't get a choice in the matter” (Wasem 2012) reflecting a deep, albeit perhaps unselfconscious, connection between Moroccan food and the identity felt by some Moroccans in the diaspora.

## Struggles

In an effort to discover any challenges associated with cooking Moroccan food in Boston I asked all of my informants whether or not they found it hard to find Moroccan ingredients in the United States. Although the majority said it was generally easy to find special Moroccan ingredients in Boston, I discovered that a variety of things can make it difficult to create traditional Moroccan cuisine in America. Some ingredients are hard to find in American supermarkets, some fresh ingredients (meat, produce, and even spices) are different than in Morocco, and the price point of ingredients in the two countries is usually not comparable. Finally, lifestyle differences including time constraints and family structure can also make it harder for immigrants in the diaspora to cook Moroccan cuisine.

To explore some of the challenges Moroccan Bostonians face in making Moroccan



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dishes, I showed my informants photographs of various Moroccan dishes. For example, when I displayed a picture of snail soup (see Figure 3) they talked about missing it and described its health benefits. When I asked if my informants could make it here most said it was hard, if not impossible, to find live snails. Responses to the picture of snail soup contradicted their initial claims that ingredients are not hard to find. In addition to this, Khadija, who frequently cooks Moroccan cuisine at home, could not find the Ramadan spice *mesqa* in Boston (Salib 2012).

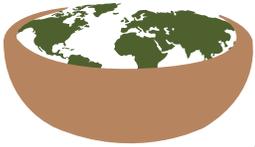
Salima, co-owner of the small but thriving Moroccan restaurant Moroccan Hospitality located in Malden, MA, talked about the importance of using Moroccan ingredients in Moroccan recipes:

Olive oil too, we get gallons and gallons of it because...when you use Italian olives, olive oil and stuff, [it] doesn't taste the same [as it does with Moroccan ingredients]. Like if I use Moroccan olives with [Italian] pasta, it is a little strong...but yeah it's just different, the olive oil is just different from one country to country (Tuma 2012).

Because Salima is cooking for customers and representing Moroccan cuisine to (often) non-Moroccan clientele she may feel extra responsibility as a cultural gatekeeper. In order to make Moroccan cuisine in Boston taste the same as it would in Morocco, Salima explained that it is especially important for her to use Moroccan ingredients with their unique flavor profiles and tastes.

But even if a Moroccan is able to get Moroccan olive oil and olives from Morocco, in some ways it is impossible to recreate dishes in exactly the same way due to regional differences in seemingly identical ingredients. Fresh fruits and vegetables taste different in America than they do in Morocco and several informants talked about the difference in both fresh produce and meat products from Morocco versus those in America. For Fatima, a twenty-seven year-old single female who just moved from Morocco to Boston about a year ago, meat in America tastes different and takes longer to cook than meat in Morocco:

I've noticed that the taste is different. Like, for example, the chicken and the lamb that I buy from the supermarkets, it tastes totally different. I'm not sure why...actually the meat in Morocco taste(s) better, a lot better... it also cooks a lot faster...in Morocco. Like if you cook the lamb here and in Morocco for the same amount of time, I think the one in Morocco will easily come off the bone really quickly compared to the one here (Wasem 2012).



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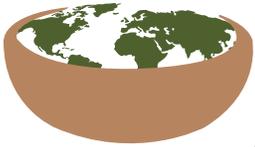
Because the meat takes longer to cook in America, Fatima has had to adjust her recipes. Ironically life is usually more fast-paced in America, but Fatima finds that meat takes longer to cook, which exacerbates the problem of making Moroccan food in the United States. Fatima also talked about the difference in fresh produce in America versus Morocco. Many more types of vegetables are available in America, but the quality and taste of the produce varies from Morocco. In response to a picture of fresh vegetables in Morocco (see Figure 5), Fatima talked about how produce is different in America:

There's this veggie that I've seen, it's called yucca, I've never tried it before, but maybe [it's] South American. The squash tastes different and there are more kinds of it here, lots of kinds that I have never eaten before like there is the acorn [squash]; I've never seen that. For some reason, there is less flavor to it here. The tangerines here, they're less sweet here....I used to love tangerines in Morocco. Lemons, yeah lemon is O.K. [in America]. Apples, apples look different there, they're not bright shiny and not only the organic ones, both of them (Wasem 2012).

In Morocco today, there are large supermarkets in big cities like Casablanca and Rabat so Fatima has had experience with packaged produce. However, most Moroccans continue to shop at a daily open-air marketplace called a souq where produce and other items are purchased directly from various vendors. The experience of going to the grocery store to buy a week's worth of produce can be strange when compared to shopping at the daily souq. Furthermore, the climate, production methods, and *terroir* of Moroccan produce impacts its flavor, taste, and appearance. As a twenty-seven year-old student named Youssef said, "Everything grows in Morocco" (Boujabit 2012). Instead of growing up with blemish-free produce sprayed with pesticides and bred to withstand long travel, most Moroccans have grown up with more flavorful (and uglier) organic produce that was trucked into a daily souq from a nearby farm. Apples in America are shinier than in Morocco (Wasem 2012), and the produce in Morocco generally tastes more flavorful according to my informants. Much of Morocco's most blemish-free produce is shipped to Europe, and Moroccans are left with the less visually appealing fruits and vegetables.

When discussing the struggles of cooking Moroccan food in America, price was often an important factor. For Amina, a community organizer and mother, the beauty of Moroccan food is that it is a delicious cuisine that is accessible to all segments of society regardless of socioeconomic status or dietary restrictions. When I asked her to describe Moroccan cuisine she said:

Everybody enjoys a nice meal. If you are rich or poor, if you are a meat



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eater or vegetarian, and Moroccan cuisine has seasons, has occasions, has culture, has a lot of things that are a part of it. Moroccan cuisine stays number one...because...with little ingredients, you can make [a] delicious dish. It's not like, you don't need lobster...to make it delicious; you just need some vegetables with olive oil, and you are all set (Basara 2012).

Youssef also discussed price in our interview, but more so in the context of how expensive healthy foods like salads are compared to unhealthy foods such as hamburgers in America:

If you get a salad it's like \$9; it doesn't make sense. But if you get two sandwiches...it's like \$4.80. It doesn't make sense. If you want to eat healthy, it is expensive. Why is it so expensive like that? I used to live in Western Mass[achusetts], and they have [a] local farmer's market. But it is so expensive; I spent like \$100 on veggies (Boujabit 2012).

Youssef was surprised at how much he could spend on vegetables at a farmer's market because he grew up in a society where it was cheaper to buy vegetables than processed western foods, like hamburgers. Amina's assertion that rich and poor can afford vegetables with olive oil diverges with Youssef's comments about expensive vegetables in America (Basara 2012). Granted, vegetables and olive oil are still much less expensive than lobster.

For many informants finding ingredients that taste good and are affordable is easy compared to finding the time to actually cook traditional Moroccan cuisine. Even though Morocco is changing, the pace and way of life in Morocco is still generally more laid-back and slow-paced compared to Boston. Moroccans customarily follow a French model allotting around two hours for lunch during the day. Most Moroccans like to come home to a freshly cooked tajine during this time to eat with their entire family, take a quick nap, and then go back to work. Youssef explains how America is different from Morocco:

It's like a way of living. We don't [have] time. It's a question of time; it's not [a] choice. You have an hour for lunch, [and] you just have time to drive, take the food from [the] drive through, and go back. That's it. Go through the drive through and go back. But before when I was in Morocco, [it] was like, what the hell, I can go to McDonald's once a week or two weeks or three weeks, but not every day. But after living here, it makes sense. A lot of things make sense (Boujabit 2012).

After living in the United States, Youssef understands why Americans value the convenience of going to a fast-food restaurant every day. Compared to a typical two-hour lunch in Morocco, a thirty-minute lunch break is a huge change in the way



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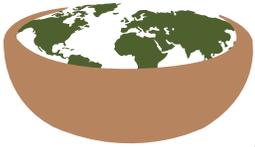
Youssef lives, which reveals how time rhythms can affect eating patterns. For Youssef there is little time to eat, much less cook a traditional tajine (Boujabit 2012).

In Morocco, the traditional lifestyle of a mother staying at home to cook for the family and care for the house allows more time for preparing elaborate Moroccan meals than for a woman working outside the home. Multigenerational households offer extra labor that can be used to prepare meals for the family. This lifestyle also allows more time for someone to shop for fresh vegetables every day and to make time-consuming dishes like couscous. Amina, a fifty-one year-old mother and wife, noted the difference in how people shop for produce in Morocco and Boston. She also commented on the difference in organic vegetables in the two countries. She found that most vegetables in Morocco are organic but in Boston only the special, more expensive ones are organic. She commented:

When you buy vegetables from Morocco...most of them are organic, most of them are daily vegetables. If you eat salad it's just like fresh from the garden, and you see people they go to the market every day to buy every day's vegetables and fruit but...there...you always have someone home to do this work. Go to the market, grab vegetables, come home, cook and lunch is ready by 12:30 or 1 o'clock...but here most of it is frozen. You get frozen peas [[here](#)]. There were a lot of people to cook for me there, but here that is not the case. I learned how to cook, because I was supposed to become a wife one day; however, my brother never learned how to cook (Basara 2012).

For Amina, having someone at home to go to the market, buy fresh produce, and cook for the family every day was a huge contrast to life in Boston where she had to buy food for an entire week in one trip due to lack of time. Because Moroccans frequently live in multi-generational homes and female labor is often relegated to the home, there is time for mothers, sisters, or maids to cook elaborate meals. In addition, many young men and women do not know how to cook traditional Moroccan cuisine, because their mothers or grandmothers never taught them how to make traditional, time-consuming dishes. While it is becoming more socially acceptable for young male Moroccans to show an interest and passion for cooking, parents are pushing their children to work harder in school for a "better life" leaving little time for children to learn how to prepare traditional meals. It is no longer imperative for every young woman to know how to cook well in order to get married someday in Morocco. Twenty-seven year-old Fatima never learned how to make couscous in Morocco, but she did in America:

Recently there have been books about Moroccan cuisine made by Moroccans,



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and that helped me actually a lot to learn about my own cuisine...from my own culture I mean...(What did you learn to cook from books here instead of there?) Couscous. I never could learn it when I was back home, because it just seemed to take so much time and...I didn't want to make the effort [but] here...I miss it, so I have to make it...for myself. Because my mother used to make it for me when I was there (Wasem 2012).

After immigrating to the United States, Fatima's mother was no longer able to make her couscous but Fatima felt that it was important that she learned how to make couscous and found the time to learn. Preparing couscous in Boston connected her to her mother's cooking and to her Moroccan identity. Despite Fatima's success, lack of cooking knowledge presents another significant struggle for immigrants reproducing Moroccan cuisine in the diaspora.

To summarize, despite informants' reports that reproducing Moroccan food in America is easily done, a deeper analysis reveals there are several challenges. It can be hard to find certain ingredients, such as live snails and certain types of flavors such as *mesqa*. In addition meat, produce, olive oil and spices look, taste, and cook differently than they do in Morocco. Vegetables, which are typical in Moroccan cuisine, are more expensive in America. Immigrants employed full-time, do not have the same amount of time to devote to cooking as they once did in Morocco. Finally, most immigrants are not able to live with their extended family, which could provide labor and valuable knowledge for preparing meals. Access to products, the quality of the products available, their prohibitive price, time constraints and lack of extended family and knowledge all present significant barriers to recreating Moroccan cuisine in Boston.

## Solutions

Historically not all immigrants have had access to ethnic food items and this continues to be true for some even today. For example, my informant Khadija for whom the flavoring *mesqa* proved impossible to find in Boston, asks her mother to bring the spice from Morocco when she comes to visit (Salib 2012). That said, the Moroccan immigrants I interviewed procure ethnic food items from a variety of sources in addition to arranging shipments from home and by visiting Morocco directly. Today they most often depend on local ethnic food markets and larger supermarkets.

Vallianatos and Raine (2008) discuss how non-recent South Asian and Arabic immigrants



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experienced extreme isolation when they first arrived in Canada due to the small size of the ethnic community and the lack of ethnic food markets. Based on my interviews and ethnographic research it seems that Moroccan Bostonians' recollections of earlier years support Vallianatos and Raine's findings. Abdel talked about how ten years ago the only Halal markets in all of the Boston area were around Haymarket (see Figures 8-10) whereas today more than eleven Halal markets are spread throughout the greater Boston area, many of which are located in Medford, Malden, and Revere (Boston Museum 2012) (Naifeh 2012). More recent immigrants discussed a choice between large Western supermarkets that are beginning to have a wider variety of ethnic foods and more expensive but also more personal ethnic markets (Vallianatos and Raine 2008). For fifty-eight year-old Nadia, Chinatown is the best place to find *worqa*, the thin sheets of pastry dough similar to phyllo dough needed to make a special meat pie called *b'stilla*, stuffed with chicken, eggs, and almonds or seafood and spices, as well as *briouats* which are small triangular or cigar-shaped pastry containing meat, seafood, or rice and cinnamon (Hadad 2012). While ethnic markets may be less economical for immigrants, they provide areas to socialize and ways to connect with one's community as Marte demonstrates in terms of Dominican Republic immigrants in New York City who "nonverbally 'narrate' boundaries of home" by frequenting specific ethnic markets (2011: 197). In the quote below, Hicham, a twenty-eight year-old sous chef at a local restaurant, talks about the importance of markets not only for finding Halal meat and Moroccan ingredients, but also for creating community:

Halal markets: O.K, they are important. If you go there, you're going to make a lot of friends, too, be friends with the people like the cashier and learn [about] a lot of people [who] go there. That's important, too...you go, like, put an announcement up there; you go...learn something. If you go to the ones they have in Beachmont...they have a board where someone has like rent, or something; they post it up there. It's one thing, and [you] just feel like if you have it, you feel like people are more organized; and [if] you don't have many, you can't meet anyone. You can go on the train and see someone there and say, O.K., you are Moroccan; but if you meet him [at] a grocery store -- at like a Halal store -- at least you're going to say Salam (Hello) and start talking and [getting to] know him (Maloof 2012).

In this way, ethnic markets help create a sense of community for an otherwise dispersed population. Halal markets are a safe space where immigrants can speak their own language and feel comfortable in a familiar setting. Perhaps one of the reasons Moroccans settled in Revere and Malden was because Halal markets opened there,



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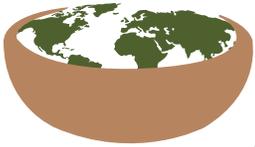
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and so people wanted to move there to be in a Moroccan community together.

On the issue of whether or not it is important to eat Halal, my informants were split. Five said it is important and the other five said it is not important for various reasons. The issue of eating Halal or non-Halal foods is especially revealing as a marker of assimilation or strong Muslim identity in light of global tension between Muslim and non-Muslim populations. When informants said it was important to eat Halal, they pointed to religious, health, and accessibility reasons. Islam was mentioned by all of the informants who indicated that they only eat Halal meat. Amina and Nadia also both said that it is healthier to eat Halal meat and Amina mentioned that it was easy to find Halal markets in Malden (Basara 2012, Hadad 2012). In contrast, Abdel said he tries to go buy meat at a Halal market every week, but does not always succeed because he is busy (Naifeh 2012). The reasons for not eating Halal were a little bit more varied. Saed loves sausage and bacon: “I’m definitely going to have colon cancer, because I eat a lot of sausage” (Abadi 2012). Alternatively, Fatima does not believe in Islam (Wasem 2012); Salima and Ahmed both feel it is not that important to eat Halal (Tuma 2012, Koury 2012); and Youssef said that it’s not important to eat Halal, but it is nice to do (Boujabit 2012). Youssef and Ahmed both had the viewpoint that if Halal was available it is good to eat it but they will not make a concerted effort to ensure that they only consume Halal meat. Youssef also clearly felt guilty that he did not eat Halal all the time and even went as far as to say, “I’m a bad person” (Boujabit 2012). It is much easier to eat only Halal meat in Morocco because almost every butcher follows religious dietary rules; but my informants also all knew of ethnic markets where they could get Halal meat in Boston if they wanted it (even if it was inconvenient at times). Those who only eat Halal meat often cook more at home than those who sometimes eat non-Halal because there are significantly fewer Halal options (mostly vegetarian or fish) in restaurants. Because all seafood is considered Halal, and consequently something that everyone can eat regardless of whether or not one eats Halal, seafood restaurants are particularly popular with my informants. Choosing to eat Halal, and to what degree, has a great impact on what my informants choose and are able to eat.

Moroccan restaurants can provide important community space and can help provide solutions to many of the challenges in preparing traditional cuisine at home such as time constraints, lack of cooking knowledge, or available labor. The restaurant Moroccan Hospitality serves as an important meeting space for the Moroccan American Cultural and Community Center (MACCC) where Moroccans can eat traditional food and plan community activities. Several informants said that Moroccan restaurants were important to the community because they provide a place for Moroccans without the know-how



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or time to cook Moroccan food to enjoy traditional cuisine in Boston. My informants often mentioned single men who may not know how to cook but can go to restaurants and eat Moroccan cuisine. Moroccan Hospitality opened up in Malden because the owners knew many Moroccans lived there and thought that they would support the restaurant. While I have not been to the restaurant when it was full with non-Moroccans, ironically the owners estimate that only about 5% of their customers are Moroccans and the vast majority of their patronage comes from curious Westerners (Tuma 2012).

Ethnic restaurants are an important way that immigrants in the diaspora define and express their identity through food. Yano (2007) discusses Japanese *okazuyas* (literally “side-dish house/business”) in Hawai’i where working-class men could purchase a “home-cooked” traditional Japanese meal. Owners may develop deeply personal relationships with their customers, portioning out the right portion of the appropriate type of food, day after day. While *okazuyas* have come to represent Japanese-ness for Japanese Americans in Hawai’i, they are becoming a relic of the past due to globalized food markets providing cheaper alternatives and owners’ children being educated enough to not have to continue the family business (Yano 2007). In the same way that *okazuyas* can reinforce a Japanese identity in Hawai’i, Moroccan restaurants like Moroccan Hospitality can reinforce Moroccan identity in Boston.

Hicham, sous chef at an up-scale modern American restaurant, challenges the idea that restaurants are important to the identity of a community because he believes Moroccan restaurants do not present an accurate picture of Moroccan cuisine and culture, nor do they represent the only choices open to Moroccan Bostonians:

Uh, no, because whenever you go to a Moroccan restaurant, what are you going to see? You’re going to see a lot of folklore; [...] you’re going to see, like, girls dancing. That’s not Moroccan. It’s like things, they’re changing. People think Moroccan cuisine, they think [that] Morocco [is] like Middle East. They see girls dancing, whatever...it’s more like a club. If you go there, have fun or whatever, but it’s not a restaurant. Some people I know if they want to go eat, they always like go to [a] Lebanese restaurant; they always go to like Ethiopians’ and some Indians’ restaurant, too, you know. (Yeah...why do they go there?) Because they serve Halal, too...Ethiopians and Pakistani...they all serve Halal food (Maloof 2012).

Hicham feels that Moroccan restaurants present an ingenuous portrait of Morocco for consumers. When conducting participant observation at an upscale Moroccan chophouse



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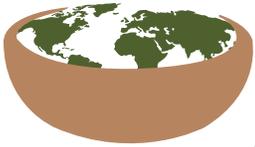
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I understood what Hicham meant; the restaurant makes Morocco seem extra exotic in order to attract clientele wishing to be transported to the East. There was a painting on the wall of a “foreign” woman dancing in front of a Western audience, set in the tropics. This is reminiscent of the sexualized nature the West often inflicts on the East. Customers may be paying for the “exotic” atmosphere of the restaurant more than traditional food. The restaurant also offers a hookah lounge and belly dancing, neither of which originated in North Africa (Maloof 2012). While the dishes I ordered tasted good, it used contemporary ways to present the dishes, typical of *haute cuisine*, in order to attract a wider clientele and charge more. While Tangierino offers a clearly exoticized version of Moroccan and Middle Eastern décor and somewhat westernized food for its customers, Moroccan Hospitality, like the *okazuyas* discussed by Yano (2007), may provide more opportunity to Moroccan Bostonians to create meaning through food. Moroccan Hospitality as well as other Moroccan restaurants and cafés, are places for immigrants to gather and to eat traditional Moroccan cuisine.

## Creolization

While the theme creolization of food runs through the literature on food and ethnicity (Mintz 1974, Lockwood and Lockwood 2002), it was not prominent in the data I collected. Although my informants did mention blending Moroccan and American dishes on occasion, they did not report doing it on a regular basis. Scholars once believed that immigrants slowly lose their own ethnic foodways and embrace Western food the longer they stay in a new country until the theory of creolization created by Sidney Mintz (1974) became widely accepted. Creolization argues that instead of simply losing ethnic foodways, immigrant populations create a new cuisine by combining elements of both traditional and Western foods (Mintz 1974). Khadija did mention that she does cook Moroccan food at home, stating that, “sometimes I will incorporate Italian ingredients [in] to my dishes” (Salib 2012). This blending of Moroccan and Italian cooking is an example of creolization. As another example, Nadia explained that when she prepares Thanksgiving dinner, she cooks her turkey with Moroccan spices to make it taste better (Hadad 2012). In a similar way, Vallianatos and Raine (2008) cite examples of Indians in Canada making pizza at home, but with Indian spices. Lockwood and Lockwood (2002) also describe turkeys being rubbed down with olive oil, lemon, garlic, spices and sometimes being stuffed with a Lebanese meat and rice dish called *hashwa*, similar to the way Nadia modified her turkey recipe. In a casual conversation with Salima at the restaurant, she mentioned a Moroccan had requested she and her sister (the other owner of the Moroccan



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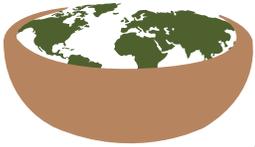
Hospitality restaurant) cook a turkey “in the Moroccan way,” which meant with Moroccan spices and French fries on top (Tuma 2012). The picture was later posted on Facebook. Creolization can provide immigrants a way of creating their traditional cuisine while fusing it with new cuisine and embracing both their American and Moroccan identities.

## Second versus First Generation

Foodways in the diaspora are particularly dynamic when a second generation of immigrants starts pushing their parents to buy non-ethnic foods. In this regard, I found that foodways follow changes in and individual or family’s lifecycle. For example, an interesting and complicated divergence exists between single informants and those with families. It seems that when a Moroccan immigrant is single, he/she eats and cooks less traditional Moroccan cuisine due to time constraints and motivation in cooking for one person. Gender difference may also come into play because single men generally reported cooking less traditional Moroccan food than the single women, although there were some exceptions (Koury 2012). When those immigrants marry, having a weekly meal of traditional cuisine, such as couscous, becomes more important and feasible in a family unit. However, as children become older, they may demand that the family eat more and more Western food.

Children growing up outside of their parents’ country create a variety of problems, but also opportunities for immigrants seeking to retain their traditional identity. Vallianatos and Raine (2008) discuss South Asian and Arabic children asking their mothers for Western foods even though the parents would prefer to only eat traditional foods. Some Muslim women interviewed in the study did not allow their children to go to non-Arabic birthday parties because they worried about their children eating food items that were not Halal (Vallianatos and Raine 2008). Abdel and Nadia mentioned that the traditional Moroccans in Boston follow Islamic dietary restrictions (Halal) extremely closely (Naifeh 2012, Hadad 2012) and I would not be surprised if they also do not allow their children to go to birthday parties for fear of non-Halal food. Lockwood and Lockwood (2002) also give the example of Western foods (such as pumpkin pie) mostly being eaten by children instead of adults at Thanksgiving feasts for Arab Americans in Detroit.

While I was not able to interview any second generation Moroccans, data from participant observation and interviews with informants who have children largely confirms the above findings in the literature. While at a crepe café with Moroccan specialties, I saw a Middle Eastern mother and father with two daughters having dinner. The father encouraged his older daughter (probably around seven years old) to try the hummus on the table.



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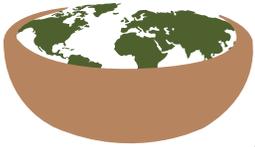
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She stuck out one finger and scooped up a tiny bite of the hummus to try. Promptly, she replied, “I don’t like it!” and went back to eating the French fries also on the table. While I could not tell whether the family was speaking Moroccan Arabic or not because they were too far away, this vignette might be typical of many immigrant families.

My participant observation at the Moroccan bakery also supports these trends. I spent over two hours there on a Thursday night, during which time I saw a total of thirty-six people come into the bakery. Similar to some pastry shops in Rabat, Morocco, the Bostonian Moroccan pastry shop is brightly lit and full of a wide variety of pastries. The bakery sells both Moroccan and French pastries, including various kinds of Moroccan traditional cookies, fancier petit fours, plastic cups of yogurt, pre-packaged *mille feuille*/napoleons, cheese/meat packages, croissants, *pain au chocolat*, Danishes, almond croissants, triangular pastries called *briouats*, vegetable pizza, and other puff pastries. There was an older Moroccan woman with a simple headscarf in the back who worked on making various pastries. If the customer spoke in Moroccan Arabic, I identified them as Moroccan. On the first Thursday night, I saw two couples come in with children, three men with children and two children that came in by themselves over the course of the two hours. When the children were allowed to choose between traditional Moroccan cookies (See Figure 6) and French pastries as a treat (See Figure 7), they chose French pastries. All of the customers with children took the pastries home to eat later instead of eating them at the bakery.

I talked with Mohammed, one of the owners, asking questions about the bakery. It has been open only for about four months, and he owns it with a friend who is the mastermind in the kitchen. I asked about other pastry shops in Revere; he said that he did not know of any but that Safy Market on Broadway was pretty well known as an ethnic grocery store and a small restaurant (Safar 2012). While he stocked canned goods in the pre-packaged area, Mohammed asked how I liked everything. I said there was a lot of almond flavor in all of the cookies. He said this is a traditional Moroccan thing and sometimes it can be too much for even him; he also noted that almonds are cheaper in Morocco. After I explained what I was studying, Mohammed noted that younger Moroccans always go straight for the pizza while the older people (who still remember Morocco fondly) go for the traditional Moroccan cookies because they remind them of home (Safar 2012).

On a separate Sunday afternoon, I also saw two women come in with children. A veiled mother came in with an older (around ten or twelve years old) boy and two younger girls (about five and seven years old) who looked at the French napoleon case and said, “This is what I want.” Ignoring their wishes, the mother ordered two



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disks of khubtz or Moroccan bread (see Figure 4). While her motivations were not obvious, it is unequivocal that the child wanted the fancy French mille feuille instead of traditional Moroccan cookies. Similar to ethnic markets and Moroccan restaurants, it is clear that the Moroccan bakery serves as a place for Moroccans (and others familiar with Moroccan/North African pastries) to have a small taste of home.

Amina is a fifty-five year-old mother and community organizer with two children, an eighteen year-old daughter who is a vegetarian attending Columbia University and a younger son (Basara 2012). Amina talked about cooking easy American items like “turkey sandwiches, wraps, cheeseburgers, and salads” for dinner frequently because her children enjoy them and the dishes take less time to make than traditional Moroccan dishes. However, Amina usually makes couscous every Sunday (instead of the traditional Friday), because that is the day when the whole family can be together for a meal and when she has time to cook the couscous (Basara 2012). Nicolaou, et al (2009) give similar examples of Turkish and Moroccan women talking about their children disliking traditional food. Unlike Nicolaou, et al’s informants in 2009, however, Amina’s children continue to appreciate and enjoy traditional Moroccan cuisine despite the family’s tendency to eat more Westernized food (Basara 2012).

Notwithstanding obstacles to creating Moroccan food in Boston, ethnic markets, restaurants, creolization, and family dynamics can provide solutions to some of the barriers. Ethnic markets can offer hard-to-find ingredients and a sense of community for Moroccan Bostonians. Similarly, restaurants can supply a “taste of home” for immigrants without the time-consuming process of actually cooking the meal. Creolization offers a way for immigrants to recreate Moroccan food with western influences or western food with a Moroccan influence, embracing both Moroccan and American identities. Differences in first and second generation Moroccan Bostonian consumption patterns suggest the importance of family in changing the way immigrants produce and consume food.

## Significance and Conclusions

While the published literature contains rich examples of Moroccan ethnographies (Newcomb 2009) and some food-centered diaspora studies (Marte 2011), this article has tried to contribute to the scholarship with its focus on the role of food in forming and changing Moroccans’ identity in Boston. Few other studies I have read discuss the struggles of cooking traditional ethnic cuisine in the diaspora, or explore possible solutions for an immigrant population. Significantly, Moroccan Bostonians define



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Moroccan cuisine in largely the same way as the Moroccans I interviewed in Rabat did, focusing on spices and sauce as well as regional and seasonal variety. It is clear from the comments of Moroccan Bostonians that ethnic cuisine can be of paramount importance for an immigrant population because it provides a way for them to feel at home in a new environment. However, a variety of barriers exist for Moroccans attempting to reproduce traditional Moroccan cuisine in the United States. Finding ingredients such as live snails and the flavor *mesqa* can prove to be challenging, if not impossible. Meat, fresh fruits and vegetables, and even chili powder taste blander and cook up differently in the new environment. Produce, a dietary staple, is more expensive in America compared to Morocco. Furthermore, it is harder to cook while living the American lifestyle, which often does not allow time for cooking and fewer women stay at home full-time. While most of my informants were able to afford specialty-imported products, this luxury is likely not true for members of other immigrant populations.

Living in Boston, Moroccans have the opportunity to shop and eat at various Moroccan restaurants and markets that are less available in some other parts of the United States. Ethnic markets provide both hard-to-find ingredients and a sense of community for immigrant populations. Additionally, Moroccan restaurants provide traditional Moroccan cuisine for those who do not have the time or know-how to produce it. The published literature, as well as my participant observation and interview data, all suggest that despite the increased availability of Moroccan food products and restaurants locally, second generation Moroccans value traditional Moroccan cuisine but enjoy more Western foods than their first generation counterparts.

My informants have less trouble eating in the diaspora than other immigrant populations because they are largely middle class with access and resources to enjoy ethnic food markets and restaurants. In the future, more research should be done with a more geographically and socioeconomically diverse population in order to provide a more complete picture of Moroccan immigrants. In addition to this, further research including extensive interviews with second-generation Moroccan Americans and families is needed for a more in-depth study of comparisons and the potential clash between first and second generation foodways.

Moroccan cuisine provides an elucidating lens through which to study the Moroccan immigrant population in Boston. While my study exposes both the barriers to reproducing Moroccan food in the United States including price, lifestyle differences, quality, access, and taste differences, it also points to possible solutions such as

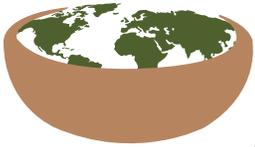


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ethnic markets, restaurants, creolization, and first and second generation foodways comparisons. Moroccans are forming their identity as Moroccan Americans by finding ways to consume and/or produce Moroccan, American and other assorted cuisines in Boston despite the challenges inherent in adapting to a different way of life.



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## Glossary of Terms

### ***B'stilla:***

a time-consuming dish usually reserved for special occasions consisting of chicken or pigeon meat, eggs, almonds, and cinnamon being stuffed and baked inside large, thin sheets of pastry. A more expensive version is made with seafood inside.

### **Couscous:**

a dish consisting of small grains of couscous topped with meat and vegetables or cinnamon and raisins.

### **Khubtz:**

disk of Moroccan bread generally used to sop of sauce from a tajine.

### **Mille Feuille:**

French napoleon pastry that is extremely popular in Morocco.

### **Souq:**

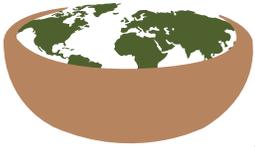
open-air marketplace in Morocco.

### **Tajine:**

traditional Moroccan dish usually consisting of a mixture of meat and vegetables cooked over low heat for a long time, cooked in a cone-shaped clay vessel also called a tajine.

### ***Worqa:***

thin layers of pastry, literally means “sheets” in Arabic.



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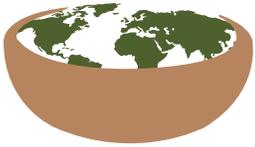
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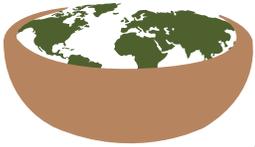
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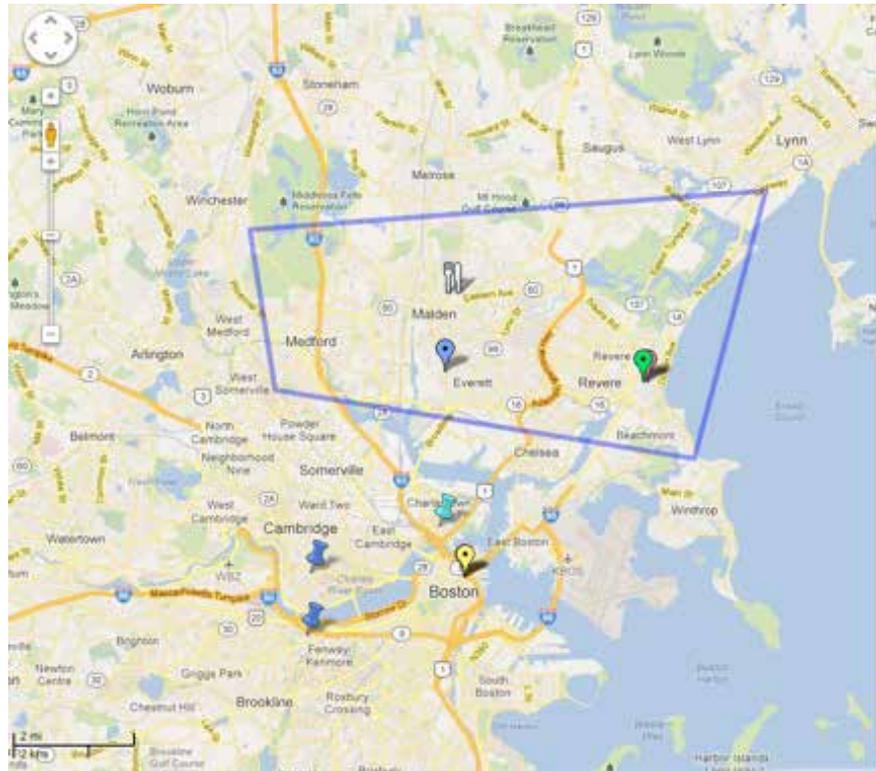
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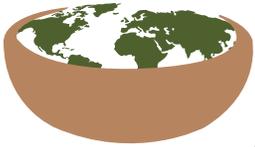
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Locations demarcated by a pushpin are restaurants and cafés that associate with the Moroccan identity in some way but serve a mainly non-Moroccan clientele. While the lighter blue pushpin and fork and knife icon indicate restaurants, the darker blue pushpins and place mark are for cafés. The yellow place makers indicate Halal markets that are frequented by Middle Eastern, North African (including Moroccan), and other clientele looking for foreign products. The green place marker is for a Moroccan bakery and the pink place marker behind it is where the first Moroccan American Cultural and Community Center (MACCC) meeting was held. The Moroccan Hospitality Restaurant in Malden is indicated by a fork and knife icon because I spent the most amount of time doing participant observations and interviews there.



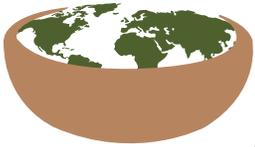
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Abdel Naifeh	30	Male	Statistician	Single
Fatima Wasem	27	Female	Medical Student	Single
Salima Tuma	55	Female	Co-Owner of Moroccan Hospitality	Widow
Youssef Boujabit	26	Male	Student/Dunkin Donuts	Single
Amina Basara	51	Female	Banker/community organizer	Married w/ children
Khadija Salib	35	Female	Works for the government	Single
Nadia Hadad	58	Female	Homemaker	Divorced w/ children
Hicham Maloof	30	Male	Sous Chef at modern American restaurant	Single
Saed Abadi	42	Male	"Jack of All Trades," community organizer	Single
Ahmed Koury	28	Male	Journalist/barber	Single

Figure 2—Informant Demographic Data



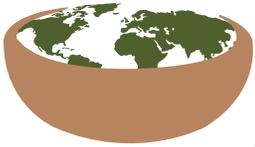
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Figure 3—Snail soup eaten at an open-air market in Marrakech, Spring 2011.



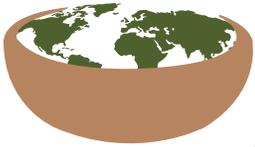
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Figure 4—Fresh lemons, oranges, tangerines, tomatoes, zucchinis, potatoes, apples, onions, and clementines at an open-air market in Morocco.



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Figure 5—Canned vegetables in the Garden Halal market including spinach, green beans, garbanzo beans, fowl beans, and other vegetables.



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Figure 6—Moroccan olive oil in Halal Garden Market.



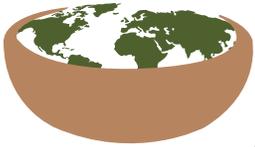
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Figure 7—What I bought at Halal Garden Market: \$2 Cinnamon Raisin Bagels, \$2 milawi/rhiaf, \$4.78 dried apricots, golden raisins, and la vache qui rit (Laughing Cow), the brand of plain cheese spread used with bread in the mornings for breakfast.



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Figure 8—Spices that I bought at Blackstone Halal Market (from left to right, \$2 each): ground ginger, saffron for flavor (as opposed to the powdered saffron that is used mainly for color), ground anise seeds for baking.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the session “Constructing Family and Community Identities with Food,” at the 112th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Chicago, November 2013. I thank Dr. Carole Counihan for her guidance in this paper, the Moroccan Bostonian community at large, and all of my warm, welcoming, gracious participants, without whom this project would have been impossible. Thank you as well to Dr. Diane Tye and Noah Morritt for their very thorough reading of this manuscript and editorial suggestions.