



Food and How it Impacts the Immigrant Experience Ana Rivera

1. The scenery of my 12-year-old self in Peru on the first day is engraved into my memory. I was called down for dinner and as I entered the dining room, I saw my younger cousin bawling hysterically while my aunts were laughing. Curious, I asked why he was crying, and my cousin answered that it was because he saw his mom kill the guinea pigs he was playing with. Those guinea pigs were the main dish for dinner. I could not bring myself to try them since I see them as pets, but my older sister tried it and commented that it tasted like chicken. Then, I remember asking my mother if she could eat the guinea pig and she answered no. Although my mother grew up eating it, after moving and living in the United States for years, she can no longer eat the dish. For her, they are now seen as household pets. This personal experience explains why food plays an important role with how immigrants identify themselves as well as keep their culture.
2. The United States is known as a “melting pot” with people coming from various parts of the world. The American Immigration Council’s “Immigrants in the United States” states that, “Today, 14 percent of the nation’s residents are foreign-born, over half of whom are naturalized U.S. citizens. Nearly 70 percent of all immigrants ... come from diverse backgrounds across the globe” (“Immigrants in the United States”). Those immigrating from different countries come to the states for several reasons. Some of those reasons may be to have a better life, education, economic prosperity, to escape due to different reasons such as religious persecution and many other grounds. No matter the reason for coming to the United States, they are leaving everything they know behind and are starting over in a new country.

Keywords: food, immigration, focus group research, culture, identity

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3. Through the journey of immigration, one thing that many bring with them are their culinary skills and recipes. The recipes they bring to their new home allows them to continue to feel connected to their birth land. Not only are they potentially learning a new language, but they are also essentially starting over. Even so, the food they make can give them comfort. There may be some feeling of isolation so with food, they can alleviate that feeling. To continue their culture from back home, many immigrants bring their recipes and traditions to the United States in order to continue to keep their culture alive within their family. Having to move to another part of the world for a better life can be difficult, but with food from home, it can ease the transition between two very different cultures.
4. Those who have immigrated to a new country continue to practice their food ritual in the same way. As Fabio Parasecoli writes, “The concept maintains analytical validity when applied to food, as users make sense of what they eat, at least when they stay within the realm of the familiar” (Parasecoli). It makes sense that they would continue to make food that they have grown accustomed to when coming to a new country. Eating what feels familiar to them allows them to still feel connected to their culture while being away. Sometimes straying away from what is known can make one uncomfortable, so choosing to eat food that gives familiarity can make them feel comfortable and feel validated. In addition, Parasecoli adds, “Every ingredient, each dish, the meal structure, and all the elements forming a culinary culture are connected. ...influenced not only by the past, frequently interpreted and practiced as tradition, but also by new occurrences resulting from both internal dynamics and the incorporation of external elements” (Parasecoli). Food and culture are connected to each other and the changes from living in a new country only adds to that culture in a new way. This exhibits how the immigrant experience in a new country can impact culinary culture but also create something more unique to an already existing tradition and way for consuming food. The social factor of what food is consumed in the United States compared to other countries given that they receive a negative reaction to their food can affect how immigrants eat and their health. The article “Fitting In but Getting Fat: Identity Threat and Dietary Choices Among U.S. Immigrant Groups” reveals that, “when faced with a threat to their American identity, Asian

Americans altered both their food preferences (Experiment 1) and their actual food choices (Experiment 2) to be more prototypically American—and, as a consequence, less healthy (Experiment 2)—than did Asian American participants who were not confronted with a threat to their American identity” (Maya D. Guendelman). When something isn’t deemed as “socially acceptable,” it leaves a mark on those that receive the negative end. If the food they eat isn’t what others in the U.S. are used to, then they change to be accepted which then affects their food culture. People change whenever they feel their identity may be challenged and not allow them to “fit in.” Even when having their identity questioned, it influences their perception of themselves and who they really are. No one wants their identity to be questioned, so it is logical that they may change how they eat to conform to their ideal perception of themselves, even if it means to change the food they once grew up with.

5. I conducted a focus group with 4 different people who have immigrated to the United States. Three of them: Raquel, Eli, and Luz being Peruvian; and the other participant, Reynaldo being Salvadoran. The purpose of the focus group was to gain more insight from firsthand experience how food may have impacted their culture and identity after moving to the states. While conducting the focus group I set up a Zoom meeting and asked 5 questions. After asking each question, each participant was allowed to answer and create a discussion. It was an open conversation where only I asked questions and the participants were fully open to talk without any intervention from myself. To get to know them more, I asked how many years they have lived in the States. Reynaldo, living the longest, stated “... tengo como 33 años de estar aquí” (“I’ve been here for about 33 years”) (Reynaldo). The rest have been living in the US for more than 20 years.
6. While living in the States, there are some differences as to what food is eaten and how it has affected how they eat back in their home country. While I interviewed my focus group, one of the questions I had asked was, “What are some changes in your diet that have occurred since you moved to the states?” One of the interviewees, Luz answered that “No comer conejo” (“Not [eating] guinea pigs”) (Luz). Another interviewee, Eli replied, “... no comido cuy, por eso lo extraño” (“... I have not eaten guinea pigs, that’s why I miss it”) (Eli). The reason for not having consumed

the Peruvian dish is because in the States they are viewed as pets and it's not socially acceptable to consume them. In addition, a third participant, Reynaldo who is Salvadoran, in the focus group responded that "no he comido mi garrobito" ("I have not eaten my iguana") (Reynaldo). As with the other interviewees, because iguanas aren't eaten in the United States like in El Salvador, they are no longer consumed. The difference between the cultures demonstrates how your plate may be shaped differently due to the living environment and what may be deemed as food by society.

7. When consuming food that is different from their culture, it leads to a change in diet and impacts health. In the American Journal of Public Health's "Dietary intake among Mexican American women: generational differences and a comparison with White non-Hispanic women" it states, "first-generation Mexican American women have a healthier nutrient intake than second-generation Mexican-American women or White non-Hispanic women of childbearing age" (Guendelman and Abrams). With the different intake of foods, it was shown that the first generation of women coming from Mexico had a better diet than those that were second generation because their food choices were not as healthy. There are many reasons why the food they eat is different which leads to a drastic change in diet which then impacts other generations to come. Between all participants in the focus group, they came to an agreement that the food in the grocery stores is different. Raquel began the conversation about changes in food by responding with "Bueno mi cambio es que la comida aquí no es nada igual que en nuestro país. Las verduras, todo lo que compramos. La carne no es igual. Todo cambia. Todo cambió. Nada bueno... No es como nuestro país, todo fresco." ("Well, my change is that the food here is not the same as in our country. The vegetables, everything that we buy. The meat is not the same. Everything changes. Everything changed. Nothing good. ... It's not fresh like in our country") (Raquel). The rest of the group agreed with her statement and Reynaldo added that "La única diferencia acá que todo lo traes. ... De los locales... que ya todo está ahí por varios días. En cambio, en los países de uno, por lo menos de donde soy yo, es del mismo día... es del propio día, [es] fresco" ("The only difference here is what you buy. ... From the stores... that everything is there for various days. While in one's country, at least from where I'm from, it's from the same day... the

day itself, [it's] fresh") (Reynaldo). The way produces and goods are given and bought is massively different compared to their homeland. There is a great difference between the quality of foods that are brought into the stores could be due to how economically different the countries are and how food is more available from the same day.

8. Culturally, the food is different from their homeland to the food in the United States. For example, in "Language Lessons on Immigrant Identity, Food Culture, and the Search for Home" the individual that was interviewed stated, "Because in Mexico, you life in Mexico . . . you eating the same in the country. Is different country, you- you kids watch the, maybe something is eating f-uh, fast food, [and they say] 'I like it.' . . . Maybe is because watch other people. 'I like it'" (Santos). The food is different, as the food associated with America is fast food and since back in their home country that is economically poorer, you are limited to what you eat but here it can be cheaper to have fast food which is what most kids want to eat instead. Personally, I have seen with my little sister, she is a picky eater and does prefer fast food over a home cooked meal. Even comparing her to my father, who prefers to eat tortillas and beans instead of eating out since that is what he grew up eating as it was the only thing he could afford back then. Because of how readily convenient fast food is, it makes sense why choosing fast food is picked before cooking a meal. As mentioned before, it is understandable how those who have immigrated chose to eat what they are comfortable with rather than fully conforming to the food practices of the new country.
9. Some may argue that food has no impact on how immigrants identify themselves as well as keep their culture. However, since the United States is known as a "melting pot" for having people of different races and ethnicities, there is an impact on what is eaten and how cultures may have changed. Another participant, Raquel answered that "Bueno, mi cultura ha cambiado porque estoy con un Mexicano, es diferente, no es igual como un peruano a peruano" ("Well, my culture has changed because I am with a Mexican, it's different, it's not the same as a Peruvian with a Peruvian") (Raquel). Due to being married to a man from another culture, both her and his cultures have intertwined with each other, embracing two cultures while living in the States. Although the culture and food are different, the love for one another brings each other together and

allows for a combination of both cultures including the aspect of food. In comparison with the other participant, Eli, she stated that “... Igual estoy. Mi cultura si no ha cambiado, está igual” (“... I am the same. My culture has not changed, it’s the same”) (Eli). Because she married someone from the same culture, there was no change to how she makes or consumes food since both eat similarly. There is a clear contrast of how food is consumed depending on who you live with. Due to the mixture of multiple cultures, it is clear how it can impact what you make and how you eat.

10. Food is an essential part of life as it is needed for survival. It is not only important for us to continue living, but it also has a great impact on who we are as people. Especially for those that have had to go through the process of immigration, food plays an important role with how they identify themselves as well as keep their culture. When someone’s identity is questioned due to their food choices, it results in a change in said identity to be able to convert into someone that is accepted, although it is at the cost of leaving behind the food once enjoyed. To keep their culture alive, through the process of creating food and continuing those traditions, it is important to them as they can still stay connected and be comforted by the food that brings them a sense of belonging and home. Along with the change of countries, there is also a social change. What was once a norm in one’s country may not be the case with the new country due to some prejudice, which can result in a change in diet. However, this change, for future generations, produces an unhealthy diet lifestyle. Immigrants who have lived in the States for some times have come to an agreement that the food is different to what was available in their countries. With the mixture of multiple cultures in America, there is a chance for them to mix and create a new culture that includes dishes from both. However, when one does stay similar, there is not much change in food, but instead allows for their food and culture to continue thriving in the new setting. Although immigrants had to go through the struggles of starting over in a new country, their food allowed them to still feel as if they were at home and continue to share their traditions and culture.

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Appendix

Transcript

Ana: La primera pregunta es, ¿cuántos años has vivido en los Estados Unidos? (“How many years have you lived in the United States?”)

Raquel: 23 años. (“23 years.”)

Eli: 27 años. (“27 years.”)

Luz: Yo tengo 25. (“I have 25.”)

Reynaldo: Yo tengo como 33 años de estar aquí. Estoy viejito aquí. (“I have about 33 years of being here. I’m old here.”)

Ana: La segunda pregunta es, ¿cuáles son unos cambios en tu dieta que ha ocurrido desde que has movido a los Estados Unidos? (“The second question is, what are some changes in your diet that have occurred since you moved to the states?”)

Luz: No comer conejo. (“Not eat guinea pig.”)

Eli: No, yo sí como de todo. (“No, I do eat everything.”)

Luz: ¿Tú has comido conejo aquí? (“You have eaten guinea pig here?”)

Eli: No, acá, no he comido cuy, por eso lo extraño. (No, here I have not eaten guinea pig, that’s why I miss it.)

Reynaldo: Yo lo que no he comido mi garrobito. (“What I have not eaten is my [iguana].”) Ana: ¿Qué es un garrobito? (“What is that?”)

Reynaldo: El garrobito es el cómo se llama, esa mascota que se llama la iguana. (“The ‘garrobito’ is what you call it, that mascot that’s called the iguana.”)

Eli: A la iguana. (“Oh the iguana.”)

Reynaldo: La hembra es iguana y el macho es el garrobo. ¿Algo más? ¿Algo más? (“The female is iguana, and the male is the garrobo.”)

Raquel: Bueno mi cambio es que la comida aquí no es nada igual que en nuestro país. Las verduras, todo lo que compramos. La carne no es igual. Todo cambia. Todo cambió. Nada bueno. (“Well, my change is that the food here is not the same as in our country. The vegetables, everything that we buy. The meat is not the same. Everything changes. Everything changed. Nothing good.”)

Eli: Oh, claro, las verduras. La fruta no es fresca. (“Oh, yes, the vegetables. The fruit is not fresh.”)

Reynaldo: La única diferencia acá que todo lo traes. ¿Cómo se llama? De los locales Safeway, Giant, que ya todo está ahí por varios días. En cambio, en los países de uno, por lo menos de donde soy yo es del mismo día, es cómo se llama, es del propio día, fresh, como se llama fresco. (“The only difference here is what you buy. How do you call it? From the stores, Safeway, Giant, that everything is there for various days. While in one’s country, at the least where I’m from, it’s from the same day, fresh, what’s it called, fresh.”)

Eli: Ajá (agreeing)

Ana: Después de la tercera pregunta es, ¿Cómo piensas viviendo en los estados ha cambiado tu cultura? Si posible. (“Well, the third question is, how do you think living in the states changed your culture?”)

Raquel: Bueno, mi cultura ha cambiado porque estoy con un mexicano, es diferente, no es igual como un peruano a peruano. (“Well, my culture has changed because I am with a Mexican, it’s different, it’s not the same as a Peruvian with a Peruvian.”)

Eli: Yo no, no cambió nada. Igual estoy. Mi cultura si no ha cambiado, esta igual. (“Me no, nothing has changed. I’m the same. My culture has not changed, it’s the same.”)

Reynaldo: A mi cultura, también ha cambiado por la diferencia del del de otro país. (“My culture also has changed from the difference of the other country.”)

Eli: Claro la comida, todo. (“Sure, the food, everything.”)

Reynaldo: Todo, la comida muy diferente, aunque no peleamos por la comida que es diferente. (“Everything, the food is very different, although we don’t fight about the food, it’s different.”)

Eli: Y también la manera de hablar, todo. (“And also, the manner of speaking, everything.”) Luz: Claro, la forma de... (inaudible) (“Sure, the form of...(inaudible)”)

Ana: Y después, siguiendo a esta pregunta, ¿cómo ha impactado tu identidad? (“And afterwards, following the question, how has it impacted your identity?”)

Reynaldo: Mi identidad. (“My identity.”)

Raquel: A mí no me cambió nada. Igual yo sigo. (“For me it hasn’t changed. I stay the same.”)

Luz: Yo también igual. (“Me too.”)

Eli: Igual también. (“The same too.”)

Reynaldo: Mi identidad ha impactado por los acentos, es lo que impacta. Lo hablas igual, pero los acentos son diferentes. (“My identity has been impacted by the accents, that’s what impacts one. You speak the same, but the accents are different.”)

Ana: Y con la comida, posiblemente ha cambiado tu identidad, en una manera. (“And with the food, if possible, has it changed your identity in any way?”)

Luz: El horario de comida, porque ahí en Perú tenemos el horario fijo en que comemos. (“The meal schedule, because in Peru we have a specific hour that we eat.”)

Reynaldo: El tiempo de hora de comida exacto de la cena. (“The timing of hour for food is the same for dinner.”)

Eli: Mas el almuerzo porque no almorzamos a la misma hora como con el desayuno. (“More about lunch because we don’t eat lunch together at the same time as with breakfast.”)

Luz: Cual quiere hora almorzamos. No es hora exacta. (“We have lunch at whatever time. The time is not exact.”)

Reynaldo: Eso impacta. Razón en eso. (“That has an impact. Right with that.”)

Ana: Mi última pregunta más es casi igual como la última pregunta ¿desde moviendo a los Estados Unidos como a la cultura de aquí impactado cómo comes? (“My last question is about the same from the last question, since moving to the United States, how has the culture impacted what you eat?”)

Reynaldo: Oh, sí, hay bastante del impacto en la forma de comer por los tipos de clase de comida, cómo se cocina, cómo se hace la preparación. Bastante diferente. Eso es lo único que me ha impactado. (“Oh, yes, there’s a lot of impact from the way of eating, by the types of food, what to cook, what the preparation is. Very different. That is the only thing that has impacted me.”)

Eli: También igualito, diferente también, la comida es diferente, es la sazón. La sazón el buen diferente. (“Also, the same, also different, the food is different, the seasoning. The seasoning is very different.”)

Raquel: Mucha grasa, grasita, comida chatarra, McDonald's. ("A lot of grease, grease, fast food, McDonald's.")

Eli: Aha, mucha grasa (Agreeing. "Too much grease.")

Reynaldo: Eso es lo que ha impactado en la forma de cómo se come la comida más rápida. ("That is what has impacted the form of eating more fast food.")

Raquel: No es natural. ("It's not natural.")

Eli: La alimentación ya cambió todo. La alimentación es otra cosa. ("The food has completely changed. Food is something else.")

Luz: No hay comida normal. ("There is no natural food.")

Reynaldo: Eso es lo que impacta más en que tienes que comer comidas más rápidas, que son más procesadas, más, más calorías. Y no hay de otra. Hay que seguir comiendo. ("That what has impacted the most, having to eat more fast food, that are more processed, more, more calories. And there no other. You have to keep eating.")

Eli: Aha, sí. ("Aha, yes.")

Ana: Esa era mi última pregunta. La entrevista ya terminada. Gracias por contestar mis preguntas. ("That was my last question, The interview has finished. Thank you for answering my questions.")

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