Chicago is a sanctuary city. This does not mean it’s a haven for criminals from other countries. This does not mean people from other countries can commit crimes with impunity. It simply means that immigrants can live their lives without worrying that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement will round them up and send them back to where they came from. Just like everyone else who moved here in search of a better life, from as far away as India or as near as the collar suburbs, Chicago has become their home. And home is the place where you’re always welcome.

One of the most universal practices of making others feel welcome in your home is feeding them. Food is the easiest way to create a sense of empathy, to make someone see and feel and taste the same things that you see and feel and taste. Most visitors to the Glenwood Avenue Farmers Market in Rogers Park

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The foodways of Chicago’s New Immigrants

Newcomers from five countries discuss the differences between eating here and in their homelands, where they dine out and shop for ingredients, what kinds of adaptations they’ve had to make, and which American foods they’re learning to love. Plus: the story of how Enemy Kitchen, Michael Rakowitz’s food truck and public art project, unites Iraqis and Americans.
are unlikely to visit the Democratic Republic of Congo. But if they stop by the Urban Tables booth and get a plate of Francine Maombi’s fufu and stewed spinach and Swahili buns, they’ll learn a little bit about what it’s like to live in Congo, maybe not the part about what it’s like to survive a war, but at least the part about what it’s like to eat fresh greens stewed low and slow all day long. It doesn’t seem like anything at all, but this plate tells you a few important things: first, that Congolese ingredients are grown, not mass-produced in factories and then frozen, and second, that meals take a long time to prepare. Nobody in Congo subsists on frozen Trader Joe’s. Maombi has never written down her recipes. “If I write it down,” she says, “that would be American food.”

Food can also be a way to welcome immigrants to America. “In America,” declares Anna Tsymbaliuk, who arrived from Ukraine two years ago, “you can find everything in the world.” To eat like an American doesn’t just mean eating burgers and fries, it also means eating the food of other immigrants. Tigist Tesfaw, who immigrated from Ethiopia in 2013, finds herself shopping at the Indian markets on Devon Avenue. The spices are similar to those she uses in Ethiopian cooking, but also, her kids now really love Indian food, even more than they love KFC.

Food also brings people together who never would have met, or gotten along, in their home countries. Tsymbaliuk taught friends from Moldova and Lithuania her recipe for syrniki, fried cheese pancakes; now they eat it too. The artist Michael Rakowitz recruits Iraqi immigrants and American war veterans to cook and serve food together at his Enemy Kitchen food truck; afterward, it’s impossible for them to continue to see each other as enemies and strangers.

Making a new home requires some adjustments. Familiar foods become weird: grocery store chickens smell like death, and if you close your eyes, you can’t tell a tomato from a strawberry. Old recipes no longer work: Tesfaw still can’t get the hang of making injera with the flour that’s most available here. Americans have strange habits: they drink their coffee alone in the morning, as fuel, instead of at night as a social ritual the way Ethiopians do. And the sheer abundance makes shopping take much longer: Elizabeth Franco, from Mexico, can spend hours at a supermarket, just marveling at everything on the shelves.

We spoke with five immigrants to find out what the historian Laura Shapiro calls their “food stories,” about what they eat and how it informs their view of the world, and with Rakowitz about the Enemy Kitchen project. Several of the immigrants didn’t want to speak about politics or the circumstances that had forced them to flee their previous homes for Chicago. But it’s impossible to talk about food these days without getting political. How can we not? We live in a country now where empathy is in short supply, led by a man whose idea of building solidarity with Mexican immigrants is eating a salad out of a taco bowl on Cinco de Mayo while he talks about putting up a wall between our two countries. How would things be different if he listened to Franco talk about chiles rellenos? It’s not everything, but it’s a start. —AIMEE LEVITT
Anna Tsymbaliuk, 31, works as a babysitter and takes ESL classes at Truman College. We met at her apartment in Edgewater, where she prepared syrniki, fried cheese pancakes, according to her mother’s recipe. Most people make them flat, but hers are spherical, like fritters. She insists they taste better this way. She served them with coffee. Starbucks doesn’t compare to Ukrainian coffee, she says, but Metropolis comes close.

In my country, you visit someone’s house and it’s eat, eat, eat! I’m from Dnipro in Ukraine. I have been two years in the USA, in Chicago. I came here because my friend has lived here 11 years. She says, “Anna, please come,” because she knows about the situation in Ukraine, and when the war started, she said, “Anna, it’s dangerous to stay in Ukraine.” And, you know, I very quickly decided I’m coming to the USA.

American people have houses and have trees, but for beauty, you know. For decoration. In Ukraine, if you have a house and space, you can grow potato, tomato, everything. And if you have a cow, you prepare it yourself, this cottage cheese [for syrniki]. And it’s amazing. My family did not live in the village. In the city, we don’t have cows. We live in apartments. We bought fruits, vegetables, everything in the market from the village, because it really tastes different. For example, one time I tried an [American] tomato or a strawberry. If you close your eyes, you never know. But when you try a real [Ukrainian] strawberry, it tastes like a strawberry. For me, [American] tomatoes, cucumbers, I know it’s organic, but it’s the same. It’s fresh, but it doesn’t really taste like cucumbers. I remember one time when I just came to America, and I was speaking with my mother, and I said, “Mom, the apple doesn’t have a smell.” You eat, but you don’t know if it’s really food or chemistry or something. In Ukraine, I never thought about it. Once I bought cherries in Indiana, from farmers. Oh, my god, it’s really cool, it’s really cherry, you know? Farmers markets are good in America. But you need to go somewhere.

I really miss food prepared by my mom. It’s not important what’s prepared. It’s important...
who prepared it for you. In America, you can find everything in the world. Everything I need I can find. There’s a lot of Russian and Ukrainian shops. Do you like cottage cheese? OK, you have it. It’s maybe a little more expensive than similar food. But I want good Ukrainian chocolate, I want Ukrainian coffee. It’s a little expensive, because they bring it to America.

I go shopping in Ukrainian Village. There are three or four shops. This cottage cheese is at Fresh Market and Shop & Save. I love Shop & Save because it’s European. Polish, I think. At Shop & Save you can find the fish for shuba [a layered salad with beets and salted herring], you can find pickles. In Ukraine, you don’t just pickle cucumbers, also tomatoes, mushrooms, everything. You put them in containers, maybe three or five days you wait. I don’t do that here. But one time I tried tomatoes prepared from a special recipe from my mother, but just one time, because it needs a lot of time.

But American food? I love it! I like burgers, I like fries. I like chicken fingers and cheese sticks. I don’t prepare it at home. I don’t know how traditional American burgers are made, or fries. I go out. Because I really enjoy it. In Ukraine, we just had McDonald’s. But now I know in Ukraine, they have a lot of American restaurants. It’s very popular. It’s just started. People show pictures on their Instagram. It’s so funny.

In America, you can find all cultures prepared, and I love it. You say, OK, today Chinese. Then Italy, pasta and pizza. It’s amazing. Every day you can eat, whatever you want. Just go on the Internet, say “OK, I want this.” In Ukraine, you can find Italian, but just one restaurant. It’s a little place, but it doesn’t have more dishes or examples.

I’m really sad when I don’t prepare breakfast for myself, because I don’t have time to prepare it. But I love it. Maybe if I’m not working, I’ll prepare it. But if I’m not working, I don’t prepare it, because I can’t afford it. [laughs] It’s a joke. In Ukraine, I prepared my meals every time because, you know, it’s expensive to go to a restaurant. In America, it’s expensive to prepare it yourself. It’s not just money, it’s your time. You need to go shopping. You spend time finding everything. If I want cottage cheese, I need to go to Shop & Save. If I want bread, I can’t find a normal bread at just one place. I don’t like this, how to say, mushy bread. OK, you bring it, you prepare it, and after you eat, you clean it up. Or you have ten dollars, you go in Mariano’s where everything’s prepared. You just take it and sit and eat. It’s ten or 15 minutes. One year, I prepared all my food every day. And now, you know, I have pizza. I make salad if I have vegetables. But if I don’t have time, or I’m very late coming home… What changed in my life? I’d like it if someone would prepare food for me.

Just my mom is still in Ukraine, because I’m alone in my family. My father died one year ago. I’m very, very sad. I miss my mom. She’s safe, because the war continues not very close to my city. But I love it in America. Really. The people, the culture. I like everything. Because every time you look and you find a difference. I love the very good roads. Because in my country, oh my god, you drive, and one moment you need a repair because there are big, big holes. You cannot drive. I love grass. I love trees. Everything is very pretty, you know.

[If mom came to visit] I would go to Ukrainian restaurants, Tryzub in Ukrainian Village. And they have one Ukrainian restaurant in Bolingbrook. I don’t remember its name. My friend is Lithuanian, and she lives near this Ukrainian restaurant. Every time guests come in, they go to this Ukrainian restaurant. She likes it because the borscht is amazing.

One time I worked with Lithuanian and Moldovan people. They don’t have syrniki. And I prepared it one day for my friends. They said, “Oh, it’s amazing!” Now they prepare it too.

There’s one place where people just speak Russian and Ukrainian, in shops, in the bank. People who don’t want to learn English make Ukraine in America. It’s like how everybody comes in and makes a little country in America. I think when you come into America, you need to speak English and understand American traditions. I like Ukrainian traditions, but I don’t want to be in Ukraine because I live now in America. If you like Ukraine, why do you live here? Go to Ukraine, speak Ukrainian with Ukrainian people!

You know, I just want to see my mother. If she comes here, I don’t want to go back [to Ukraine]. If she can’t, I think I’ll try to go back. But no, I like America. I like everything. Every country has positives and negatives, but this country has more positives than negatives, for me.
Francine Maombi, 30, settled in Chicago a little more than a decade ago. She and her family spent years fleeing war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, at various times sheltering in Rwanda or Burundi. When she arrived here she put down roots in Rogers Park, joining the Mennonite Living Water Community Church. Last year she found herself in need of part-time work that would allow her to continue caring for her two small children at home. That’s when Living Water’s Autumn Williams approached her about coming on board the church’s catering company, Urban Tables, which cooks for large events and provides weekly meals for pickup for busy families. Over the last year Maombi has learned to cook American, Thai, Italian, Greek, Mexican, and soul food. She’s also taught her co-workers how to cook Congolese. On the day she spoke to the Reader she was preparing a spread for the caterer’s weekly stand at the Glenwood Sunday Market. It included rice, beans, stewed spinach, cabbage, beef soup, roasted chicken legs, lightly sweet doughnut-like fritters called mandazi (aka the Swahili bun), and fufu, the ubiquitous African cassava-flour staple that serves as the elastic vehicle for much of this hearty, homey food.
The war was back and forth, so we flew to Rwanda and then a few months come back. The way you go back and forth you lose everything you have. When the war started we went to a Burundi refugee camp. It was difficult because no family member was working. Sometimes in morning you don’t know what you gonna eat at lunch. But somehow God opens the door. Sometimes you just pray ‘God, we don’t know what we gonna eat tonight.’ And somehow you find something to eat. Some rice. Beans. Cabbage. Potato. Back home we have a lot of fresh fish and it costs less than here because we live nearby Lake Tanganyika.

The enemy come to kill us there. One night they kill 106 people. We didn’t want to stay in the refugee camp anymore because we were scared.

[My] anniversary is on March 29. So it’s like ten years and four, five months. I come with my mom, my three brothers. Most African families have a lot of kids. We had the smallest family in Africa.

That was very hard when we got here. We didn’t speak any English. We saw snow. I was excited for first time to see snow, but when I touch it I was like, ‘Oh no!’

That time we didn’t have a lot of people from my country [here]. My caseworker she just bring a small rice cooker and a lot of chicken, in the fridge. We eat meat but not much, so it was like very hard for us. Because we not used to eat plain rice.

When I get here I shop in [the] African store, but the more I learn the more I realize they are expensive. I learn which store is good on beef, which store is good on flour.

I been working here one year. When I started the same day [customers] request Congolese food. Congolese takes a long time to cook. We cook different than American. A lot of Americans eat canned food, but we don’t. We just like fresh.

When we cook Congolese, we are not really committed to seasoning stuff. Congolese is not much spicy. We make sure not too much oil, not too much seasoning. It’s simple. We are really committed to green stuff. Spinach. Cassava leaves. Only it takes a long time. I don’t cook high fires, fast fires. I cook slowly. We don’t want to eat a lot of meat.

We want people to learn so we can grow bigger than one person making Congolese food.

Africans, we are not familiar with frozen food. Anything we like to buy, we won’t keep frozen. I learned to cook more frozen things when I started working here. I use it but not much. You will look in my freezer and there is maybe frozen meat or frozen spinach or something, but not a lot. Sometimes we think the things we put in the freezer is not fresh. I put meat in there. Maybe ice in there and green stuff. I like to serve fresh but when we have a lot of people it’s hard. Congolese food takes a long time to cook. I have some dishes that take four hours, five hours, so it’s hard to serve fresh—but we have to cook ahead of time.

I don’t follow recipes. I know I have to put this much salt, this much oil. Congolese food, if I write it down that would be American food. There are some people who are African—they don’t have time to cook. They are busy and they start eating American food. If we are cooking they can buy from us—or if American people want to taste what we make.

I started to learn American food because I don’t make American food at home. Here we cook a lot of different food, but I don’t have a favorite. Maybe pizza.

When my family comes I like to show them what I learn. I make different American things. Like pizza. Pies. Brownies. When we make brownies we say, ‘Ah, this is chocolate fufu.’ I show my mom I learn more than what she teaches me. Makes them happy.

I like to cook and I like to give my culture. I don’t want to forget how we were doing [it]. I have to show how back home it was like this. I enjoy that part—to let people know who I am or where I come from. Some people don’t like to do that because they think it don’t look good. It might not look good to you, but it’s good to us.
My story is a little bit sad, like many others. I was finishing my master’s degree in Mexico City in 2014, and I married a U.S. citizen. He was Mexican but he’d been naturalized. We decided to come here after I finished [my degree] because he thought it would be easier for him to find a job. We came to Chicago in February 2015 to live with his family, but the same month that we arrived, he died.

The truth is, I was [feeling] very bad in that moment. I came back to Mexico, but I had already started the paperwork for U.S. residency. A letter arrived that said to complete the process, I have to be living in the United States. And that if I don’t complete the process it’s illegal, and they will take away my passport and tourist visa for ten years.

So I decided to return here in July 2016. I start living with one of my husband’s friends because his mom and his sisters don’t want to talk with me. I think that maybe they have a lot of pain. I didn’t know anything of the city or the people, I didn’t speak English well. I arrived at Casa Michoacan because I’m interested in immigration issues. I was a volunteer for one year. Now I’m a [U.S.] resident, and I work with them, giving information to Mexican people about their rights, [like] what can I do if a policeman asks questions about immigration?

I miss corn. It’s quite different—corn here is very sweet, very yellow. In Mexico it’s bigger, white, not so sweet. And we have blue corn. I miss that—it has a different flavor. In Mexico there’s a type of avocado with a soft skin that you eat. You put it in a tortilla with the skin
and eat it. And there the chicken is yellow because they [dye it]. I think the chicken smell bad here. I can smell death, like rotting meat. In Mexico it’s not like that.

I really like cooking. I’m a vegetarian, but I cook meat for people who aren’t vegetarians. Honestly, I never liked meat. I’ve been a vegetarian for 12 years, since I was 19. In Mexico there’s a lot of poverty. Even though we eat meat, we always try to eat very little. When Mexicans immigrate, they start to eat more meat. I think that it’s because they think that since they have money, they can eat more. All the Mexicans I know here eat a lot of meat. I’ve also learned to eat things that I didn’t before. Here all the Mexicans eat a lot of beans. I couldn’t eat them before but now I do. When I’m invited places I have to eat them.

Here there’s the possibility of trying things from different parts of the world, [which] I love. In Mexico we don’t have much foreign cooking; there’s Japanese food, Chinese food, and nothing else. Here we have the opportunity to try Indian, Italian, Chinese food, and the Chinese food is very different than what they sell in Mexico. I like Indian food a lot.

I still cook only Mexican food, but the products [I use] have changed. Like in Mexico, there aren’t many differences in the oil you use. There are only three brands of oil. And here you can buy avocado oil, olive oil, grapeseed oil, coconut oil. That changes the flavor of the food. People here use a lot of pink salt, which they say is healthier. In Mexico I’d never seen that in my life. All these little ingredients make the food taste different.

Chiles rellenos, in Mexico, are made with poblano chiles. Here we have the chance to try the banana pepper. It’s easier to cook because you don’t have to toast and peel it. You just open it, take out the veins, put cheese inside, and fry it.

One of the differences between Mexico and the United States is that in Mexico we only have three supermarkets: Walmart, Chedraui, and Comercial Mexicana. Sometimes I like to go to the stores [here] just to see the quantity of products that you can choose. If you go and you want to buy oil, there’s an enormous quantity. If you want to buy shampoo, it’s not something you do in just a few minutes.

I really like cooking for other people. If I’m cooking just for myself, I don’t like it. My husband’s aunt, I get along really well with her, and she has lots of parties. She celebrates Christmas, Halloween, the Fourth of July, Fiestas Patrias—almost every 15 days, there’s a party. And we share the food, like, you make the chiles rellenos, you make the posole, you make the rice. We cook for about 40 people, but I like it.

When I cook, I like to do it with lots of happiness, lots of love. I think it changes the flavor [of the food]. I even write about food. I have a poem that talks about my feelings when I’m making chiles rellenos. It’s a little crazy, but I like it.
Until arriving in the U.S. in 2013, Tigist Tesfaw, 51, was an attorney in Ethiopia and ran a large social service agency for survivors of gender-based violence. Despite the demands of her job she always found time to cook for her family and friends. She can’t share the circumstances that made her flee Ethiopia for fear of endangering her relatives. Today she regularly prepares Ethiopian meals for her husband and children, as well as other immigrants, refugees, and asylees at the Marjorie Kovler Center in Rogers Park. She also continues to work with survivors of gender violence as a shelter advocate at Apna Ghar in Uptown. She dreams of starting an Ethiopian restaurant with affordable prices and a brunch menu.

In Ethiopia most of the household activities are laid on the mom, the woman, and as a first child and as a girl I’m supposed to cook a lot. Since I’m eight or nine years old I was involved in a lot of cooking, baking. The simplest was shiro wot. The texture is like a paste when it’s cooked, but it’s simple, you can make it in a few minutes. It’s prepared from chickpea and yellow pea grains, and then we spice it, and then we make the powder. Every household has that powder, every household in Ethiopia—you can find it both in a rich house and in the poorest house.

I had a big single-family house with three bedrooms, kitchen, service quarters, outside in my home city, Hawassa, the capital of the south region. I was the executive director of the agency I established, serving women and children. I was really busy when I was there—too much responsibilities as a director. I used to work day and night, I didn’t have enough time for sleep. In the meantime I wanted to take care of my family, I would like to participate in the kitchen, I didn’t want to be far away from my kitchen.

Here, you don’t have anyone other than family to help with the kitchen, even to wash dishes. So I’m running to work, then when I’m coming back there is social life, so I’m busy always. I am cooking more here. Here the interaction with the people, it’s most of the time related with food, so if someone calls me for dinner or something, I want to bring something, I cook.

Most Ethiopian people don’t survive without injera. I have a sister who’s living in San Jose—when she goes back home she brings injera in the freezer. We have another way: injera chips. Back home they will dry it under the sun and then they make it in pieces. My mom always sends me that and then we make...
some sauce and mix it with that sauce. It will become like fresh injera, it soaks in the sauce.

Some stores around the Broadway area are having the injera, but it's totally different. It has little bubbly eyes, and the texture looks right, but if you are Ethiopian and you know the real injera you can tell. Whenever we meet with Ethiopians that is the discussion. The problem is the flour. I don't know what's going on with it. I was the expert back home, I was cooking very nice injera, perfect injera, but here it's strange.

There are little changes from home. I try to adjust. I discovered the American all-purpose seasoning powder. I found that is the perfect ingredient for samosas. Here the butter is different. American butter doesn't have taste. You can smell our butter. Actually, we melt the butter, we put some spices, and then when it's settled you separate the spices and melted butter and then it has a very nice flavor. With American butter it has no taste, even if you put similar spices.

I have three kids, my older son is back home and my two younger kids are here. My young son is 17 and my daughter is 22. They want to learn, to try the American food but I don't want them to go to junk food like McDonald's. They asked me to show them KFC—I took them like twice and then they stopped. They love Indian food. I cook the Indian rice biryani. Since I love to cook here I don't go to many restaurants. I don't really like Ethiopian restaurants, I can make the best one here, so why should I go there? All my friends know my house, everybody comes to my house, I like to invite people for lunch.

Two years back, I started at Apna Ghar, my current job. We have a cooking group every other Thursday with the clients. Most of the time we enjoy Indian and Pakistani meals—I learn their food. Because we have similar spices, similar flavors, Indian and Pakistani food makes sense for Ethiopians, and Ethiopians make more sense for them.

Mostly I go to the Devon Avenue stores. For meat there is one store on Broadway, a German butcher shop, if I would like to make kitfo. It's tartare—very fine chopped meat with spices. Otherwise I go to Shan Grocery on Sheridan and Winona. It's a Pakistani, Indian, and Ethiopian store, that's also one of my favorite places for meat. Beef is very common, and we love lamb. Chicken is the most respectful. We don't do like you guys here—the whole chicken which is sold at Jewel-Osco, roast chicken—that's not really common. Our way it's for the big holidays like New Year, Easter, and Christmas. It's common, but it's special.

I love the cooking group [at the Kovler Center]. Sometimes more than 30 people come, 40 people. It's kind of an interesting interaction between the people—men and women are working together, everybody is participating, it was impressing for me. I've had Rwandan, Indian, Ethiopian, Philippines, Irish, Chinese... If it's Thanksgiving we cook the turkey and other side dishes. I love Thanksgiving. From all the American holidays, I'm really happy to be part of the Thanksgiving because we have to be thankful for something, for our life. I'm really impressed with Thanksgiving. But I'm not really that much interested for the food. I don't like turkey, I don't know how people like it. I tried it—mild, no spice. I learned the mashed potato, but it's not that much flavor, even my kids they don't like it.

I wish to have an Ethiopian restaurant but I don't want it to be just like the Ethiopian restaurants existing right now. I have a lot of friends, Americans or from different countries, and when we are talking about the food they're telling me, “I love Ethiopian food! I wish I could go to restaurants, but I couldn't afford it because it's very expensive.” I'm thinking: How could I make a small price and nice food? I haven't seen Ethiopian brunch food here, but we do have a lot of food that can be a brunch. We have kita firfir or chechebsa, made from bread and flavored butter. It's a very nice, filling food, and it could be for brunch. And we also cook eggs in different ways.

Here people are drinking coffee in the morning just to wake up, but not for us. We drink coffee at night. I don't do the coffee every day, but if I want to have real coffee I want to start from scratch. I roast [the beans]. The coffee ceremony is very important back home—it was always during the night, when families gather together. It is a process. It's a kind of discussion space. Most of the women don't work outside, they don't make money, so the neighborhood women are gathering together, discussing common issues, problems, finding the solutions. It's really a very interesting and sweet thing. We enjoy the friendship, the affection, drinking the coffee, being together, talking, and telling stories.
The ARMENIAN-IRAQIS

By Michael Gebert

A century ago, Krikor Sarkees’s grandparents fled the Armenian genocide and settled in Baghdad, Iraq, where Krikor would eventually be born. A few decades later Sita Sarkees’s father, also of Armenian Christian background, was taken by his parents from Iran to Iraq; she too would grow up in Baghdad. Six years ago, when other people their age would be thinking of retirement, Sita and Krikor left a war-torn Iraq to settle in Chicago, where Sita’s brother already lived—and earlier this year, the couple (he’s 63 and she’s 55) were naturalized as American citizens. Speaking almost no English when they arrived, they’ve been learning the language and the ways of their new country at World Relief Chicago in Albany Park. The diverse array of international grocers in that area and all over the far north side has helped them maintain Iraqi foodways at home, often by adapting the ingredients they find here to make Iraqi food in America.

**Sita:** We are Armenian, but we were born in Iraq—Baghdad, the capital. We didn’t cook Armenian food. It was Iraqi, Middle East food. I don’t know what they eat in Armenia—I’ve only seen it in pictures! We cook chicken, beef, lamb, fish. We’re Christian. We will eat pork, but it’s not in the supermarket—only canned pork is. Christian people go hunting in the desert [for wild pig] and they cut it and sell it to their Christian neighbors.

We cook many kinds of chicken. Maybe cooked only with water, then put in the oil with the spice. We have a plastic box in Iraq. You put everything inside it the day before: yogurt dressing, tahini, garlic, and onion—put everything in the box and put it in the fridge. We had electricity, because my brother had a big generator, so we had a fridge. Next day, you put everything in a bag, with little holes, and you put the bag in the oven.

**Krikor:** We had a fridge, a microwave oven, because we are in the capital. In the villages, maybe they don’t use the big stove, they used to cook on the charcoal. But now they have ovens too.

**Sita:** We eat a lot of rice, with everything, rice and salad. Bread, we buy—the Arabic bread, big and flat. But it’s not for every food.

**Krikor:** We eat it with soup, tashreeb [broth-soaked bread topped with meat or vegetables]—it’s like soup. Not soup, but like soup. Muslim people eat tashreeb with their hands, but we don’t. We eat it with a fork.

**Sita:** You put the beans in a pot and boil. Boiling, boiling, boiling. And then cut the Arabic bread and put it in the pot. Put the beans over it, and then the onions with oil, and then butnuyj [a dried wild mint]—this is famous in Iraq. And then you put the eggs on top. It’s very delicious.

We can find the things we need at the Arabic stores on Devon. They have many Arabic and Assyrian stores at Devon and Western. They have everything.

**Krikor:** Things can be easier to find here, because in Iraq they are seasonal, but you have them in all the seasons here.

**Sita:** We can find anything, but the food is very expensive. In Iraq dates are cheap, but here they are very expensive.

**Krikor:** We have tried some American things, like pizza. I like pizza, but not their way. Not the same pizza.

**Sita:** We put onions and tomatoes and green pepper on it. Sometimes I put mozzarella cheese, sometimes with beef or chicken.

**Krikor:** For me, I don’t like Chinese food.

**Sita:** Because he doesn’t like fish. But I like fish.

I make burek [stuffed filo pastry]. I buy the burek dough already made. On the package it’s called spring roll. I put meat on it and roll it up and put it in the fryer. Sometimes with potatoes. My niece comes, she’s two or three—she likes potatoes. Sometimes spinach. But Krikor is diabetic, so he can eat only the meat.

Iraqi breakfast is very different from how American people eat breakfast—we have cheese, jam, honey, olives. Every day olives and eggs. I buy Greek olives, and do you know the Kiri cheese? I think it is French maybe. I buy that at Tony’s, and now I like the pepper jack cheese. Very spicy.

**Krikor:** Before I cannot eat the spicy food in Iraq. Now I eat it because the doctor says it is good for you. I have a blood problem, and it is good for your blood.

**Sita:** Maybe tonight I will make za’atar with tortilla bread. You put oil and za’atar on the tortilla, put in the oven for two or three minutes. Sometimes with the tortillas I put mashed potatoes and cheese and put them in the oven. What we would do in Iraq with lavash you can do with the tortillas. In Iraq we do the dough in the home, but this is easy.

We ate tacos here, for the first time, in Chicago.

**Krikor:** She likes them, I don’t.

**Sita:** We have lots of sweets in Iraq. For my landlord, one time he came to look at something in the home. I make a cake. He say it looks very delicious. I say, “I’ll do one for your baby’s birthday, OK?” The marble cake is two colors, brown and white. I looked at Armenian recipes for cakes. He tries it and he says, “Oh my goodness! It was very good.”

**Krikor:** When we came here, we didn’t know anything about the United States.

**Sita:** “We ate tacos here, for the first time, in Chicago.”

**Krikor:** “She likes them, I don’t.”

**Sita:** My brother said, “Come, come here, don’t stay in Iraq. It is very beautiful, it is good for you.” When I got here, I didn’t speak any English. I woke up every day and I cried. I cried because I couldn’t talk to people. You don’t know who your neighbors are. Everything was strange for us. I said, “I want to go home, I cannot stay here.” My brother says, “No, you can stay!” Now I speak a little English, maybe 10 or 15 percent I can speak.

**Krikor:** We were in the dark. But everything is good here.

@skyfullofbacon
The Enemy Kitchen food truck has an erratic and unpredictable schedule. Most of the time it sits on the plaza outside the Museum of Contemporary Art, which is currently showing "Backstroke of the West," a midcareer survey of the work of the food truck's proprietor, the artist Michael Rakowitz. (Do not call it a retrospective. "A retrospective," says Rakowitz, "is a living funeral.") Inside the gallery, a plaque briefly tells the story of Enemy Kitchen's history and mission, and describes the truck itself as an "installation."

But on select Friday evenings and Sunday afternoons for the last two months, Enemy Kitchen has opened to feed the masses. (The remaining date is October 22 at noon.) All the food is free, for as long as the supply holds out.

For a stint in 2012, Rakowitz prepared food inside the truck. Now chefs at Marisol, the MCA's new restaurant, do the cooking, using Rakowitz's family recipes. While the artist, assisted by American veterans of the Iraq war, dishes out the food onto paper replicas of Saddam Hussein's china.

On the Sunday morning after Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement, there was a problem with the gas in Marisol's kitchen, and Rakowitz and the MCA thought they might have to cancel the event. But the gas was restored, and Sam Berman, the chef on duty, was able to prepare the kofta (meatballs), kubba stew, masgouf (grilled fish), and amba and fattoush salads, and food service begins at 2 PM as scheduled. Already, there are about 50 people lined up and waiting. "It's a Yom Kippur miracle!" Rakowitz tells them.

Rakowitz has curly dark hair and a dramatic mustache, and he speaks rapidly with a slight New York accent. His body is usually in motion, and you get the impression that his brain is too. He likes to talk. In most of his work he considers the relationship between the U.S. and the Middle East not through the lens of abstract foreign policy, but in ways that are much more accessible: pop culture (the title "Backstroke of the West" comes from an Arabic mistranslation of the title of a Star Wars movie), reproductions of lost artifacts, and, especially, food.

Today's Enemy Kitchen service begins, as usual, with a brief welcoming speech/artist talk from Rakowitz. Initially he thought about incorporating the Yom Kippur themes of atonement and forgiveness, but instead he decides to focus on the story of the truck itself. It goes like this:

In the fall of 2001, Rakowitz, who was then living in New York, noticed that the lines outside Khyber Pass, an Afghan restaurant in the East Village, had grown unusually long. The customers were staging a form of protest against the anti-Muslim rhetoric and attacks on mosques that had begun after 9/11: they were going to support the people of Afghanistan by eating eating their food. They couldn't support the people of Iraq in the same way because there were no Iraqi restaurants in New York.

Rakowitz had first become aware of the connection between food and politics and heritage a decade earlier, during the initial sorties of the first Gulf war. He was 16 years old and living in the same town on Long Island to which his grandparents had immigrated from Iraq, via Mumbai, in 1946. His grandfather, Nissim Isaac Daoud bin Aziz, anglicized the family name to David and went into business as a date importer. Rakowitz grew up eating Iraqi food, hearing his mother and grandparents speak Arabic when they didn't want him to know what they were talking about, and listening to his grandmother Renée's stories about how, in Baghdad, she would tell time by the "singing towers," the minarets which issued the Muslim call to prayer five times a day. "Now," he says, "the stories were at risk. The place they had fled was at war with the place they fled from."

Rakowitz's mother, Yvonne, didn't want her sons to experience Iraq for the first time through the blurry green night-vision footage on CNN. "There was only vulgar and..."
war was getting under way, Rakowitz corrected, it was Osama bin Laden. No, said a third student, it wasn’t the Iraqis, but the way that breaks down assumed cultural barriers. Michael is sharing his family. That’s not how you interact when you’re at war.”

But many of the Iraqis associated with the project have had more complicated reactions. The Iraqi community in Chicago is an old one: the first Assyrians, Aramaic-speaking Christians from northern Iraq, arrived nearly a century ago. But during the first Gulf war, many became afraid of being identified as the enemy, and even after hostilities subsided, they were reluctant to broadcast their background. And now, although Iraq isn’t included in the current iteration of President Donald Trump’s travel ban, Iraqis view it as a ban against Muslims in general and are afraid to give the government any possible reason to notice and deport them. (This is not an irrational fear; earlier this year, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement rounded up dozens of Assyrians in Michigan and sent some back to Iraq.) It’s difficult, Rakowitz observes, to talk about Iraq without talking about politics. And so, while Rakowitz continues to invite Iraqis to participate in Enemy Kitchen, many of them, as he puts it, “keep it in an indeterminate space when we talk.”

While the Enemy Kitchen food truck is one of the few openly Iraqi institutions in the city, it’s not the only place that serves Iraqi food. The food truck spent several years parked behind the Pita Place. Last June, vandals attacked it, and then, finding nothing of value, attacked the restaurant itself. After that, Rakowitz had the truck towed and set up a Kickstarter campaign to restore it. The MCA exhibition provided a good excuse to revive the food-serving part of the project.

After Rakowitz finishes explaining the history of Enemy Kitchen and the two veterans

The literal vehicle for Enemy Kitchen is a vintage 1960 ice cream truck, painted military green, and decorated with an Iraqi eagle and the Chicago flag in the Iraqi colors, black, red, and green. © GREG BROSEUS

The foodways of CHICAGO'S NEW IMMIGRANTS

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The veterans found it liberating to meet and work with Iraqis. Today’s servers, army vet Aaron Hughes and navy vet Michael Applegate, were forbidden to have contact with civilians during their time overseas; Hughes was once disciplined for giving an old woman a drink of water. “People say, ‘Thank you for your service,’” he says, “but I don’t feel good about it. I prefer serving in this way, in a very social, human way that breaks down assumed cultural