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SUSTAINING COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY THROUGH FOOD AT THE

UNIVERSITY OF MAINE

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Anthropology)

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ABSTRACT

International students often travel thousands of miles to attend the University of Maine. Foodways become a way to sustain one's communal and self-identity. Food is more than nourishment: certain dishes also tell stories and become building blocks for conversation. Here, I focus on how international students use food as a vehicle to build community and understand the role of food to comfort and engage individuals. I also consider access to culturally significant ingredients, as the greater Orono/Bangor area lacks markets and stores that carry certain products. Through interviews, individuals shared their foodways and experiences as international graduate students at the University of Maine. My findings show that international graduate students utilize food to maintain cultural identity, but barriers such as time, energy, and access to ingredients and transportation inhibit how often these students can engage in these cultural practices. These findings also bring cultural awareness and transmission of culture to the University of Maine campus.

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INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, safety protocols prevented students from eating in any of the dining halls on the University of Maine campus. UMaine provided students with bright green, reusable plastic containers that we would load with various foods and carry back to our dorm rooms, where many of us ate alone at our desks. This experience was highly isolating and, admittedly, sad. I grew up eating dinner with my family nearly every single night. My parents are talented cooks, and no matter how many viola practices, SAT prep classes, or tennis lessons they schlepped me to, after their long days of work, a homemade dinner greeted my sister and me almost every night. Until university, I had not realized how uncommon it is to share a meal with family so often. Even in the angsty days of being a teenager, my parents tried to engage with my sister and me, and while we responded sarcastically at times, the dinner table was a space for us to be present with one another. I did not realize the deep significance food had on my emotional and personal well-being until I no longer had that comfort. I carry this tradition with my roommates and friends in university. While our meals are much humbler, we use this time to reflect on our days and simply be with one another.

Food transformed into a vehicle through which I could embrace my cultural and ethnic heritage. During my final year of college, food research and community events based around food, such as “Rivers, Cultures, and Cuisines,” popped up all over the UMaine campus. Hoping to explore my identity, I attended “lunch and learns,” potlucks, and other culinary community events. These experiences exposed me to new cuisines, people, and cultures. At the root of all these events was community. As an observer and participant in these events, I witnessed meaningful conversations, and I met many

international students at these events. This study aims to bring cultural awareness and transmission of culture to the University of Maine campus and provide a space for participants to share their foodways and experiences as international students. Here, I explore how traditional foods and foodways can serve as touchstones for identity and culture within the community of international graduate students at UMaine.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food often transcends itself as physical sustenance and becomes a way for people to express who they are and who they hope to be (Dottolo, 2018). Since food is closely linked to identity, the inability to make or consume certain foods impacts an individual's cultural well-being (Wright et al., 2021). Foodways allow us to examine the intersections between the growth, cultivation, consumption, and waste of food and what these processes reveal about the human experience. While researching the impact of restaurants and mobile food organizations on multiethnic communities in New York City, Noah Allison (2017) wrote, "Centering attention on foodways—the social, cultural, political, and economic aspects of food—scholars in the humanities and social sciences reveal that comestibles provide some of our deepest and most multifaceted connections to places and to each other" (Allison, 2017, p. 5). Meal preparation, sharing, and consumption with others — whether they share the same identity or not — act to build stronger social networks (Wright et al., 2021).

Food is a meaningful way to understand cultural identity, emotion, relationships, and interactions, and it becomes an avenue for discourse (Riley & Cavanaugh, 2017). For example, when one shares an evening meal with a group of people, the individual often feels happier and more engaged in their local community (Dunbar, 2017).

This study builds upon research that analyzes the intersection of food and identity. The goal of this thesis is to understand how food sustains cultural identity among international graduate students on the University of Maine Orono campus. Some research has already been done to analyze the intersections between cultural identity and food on the University of Maine campus. The most significant study is Hui Qian's master's thesis,

“Performing Identity through Hotpot: Chinese Sojourning Students in Maine” (2012), in which she considers how Chinese students at UMaine utilize hotpot to perform identity. Qian found that Chinese sojourners on campus were willing to adapt to new customs, acknowledged dietary differences between the United States and Maine, and “took the initiative to appreciate and embrace the foreign food” (Qian, 2012).

According to data from 2024, students from over 80 countries attend UMaine. Of the 11,561 total students who attend the university, over 500 are international students (Quick Facts - the University of Maine - University of Maine, n.d.). This study explores how international graduate students use food to maintain a sense of cultural identity. While ever-changing and fluid, identity can be accessed through the examination of foodways and food practices. Food extends beyond the material culture and acts to maintain identity when an individual is away from their home country; food provides us with a sense of belonging.

It is important to distinguish the difference between international students and immigrants because the legal status of the groups impacts public perception and ability to navigate their environment. The main population analyzed in most of the reference literature referred to which this thesis refers is immigrants. In the United States, immigrants and international students hold different legal statuses. A non-immigrant is “someone who meets one or more of the following criteria:

- intends to stay in the US temporarily
- does not have US citizenship or legal permanent resident status (a valid ‘green card’)
- currently is in the US on a non-immigrant visa status (without a valid green card)
- applies for a visa to be allowed entry into the US” (University of California Berkeley, n.d.).

The line quickly blurs as international students can also be immigrants. The Migration Policy Institute defines an immigrant as a person who “intend[s] to stay in a new country permanently” (Migration Policy Institute, 2019). Homeland Security utilizes “nonimmigrant to refer to foreign nationals admitted into the country temporarily for a specific purpose” (U.S. Customs and Borders Protection, 2024). Participants in my study did not explicitly identify themselves as immigrants. When calling for participants, I used the term “international students” in all recruitment material and when conducting interviews. Rather, international students are considered sojourners, temporary residents. Nevertheless, while this terminology holds important distinctions, the process of using food to reminisce or share meals when one is far from the physical location of “home” transcends these identities.

Food as text

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz understood culture as an organized system and collection of symbols; symbols become a way to transmit meaning. Objects, like food, become “an ensemble of texts” (Geertz [Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight], 2020, p. 473) that can be analyzed to discover deeper meanings of the culture or individual. Similarly, in “The Raw and the Cooked,” Claude Lévi-Strauss (1975) considers how culinary preparation and food reveal a considerable amount about human society as food is a way of communicating, similar to grammar. In his other works, Lévi-Strauss explains that for food to nourish us physically, it must satisfy our minds (Stano and Bentley, 2019). The term foodways entered popular academia in 1996 (Cosgrove, 2015). Since then, the scholarship on foodways has expanded considerably. Studying and analyzing foodways are means for scholars, community members, politicians, and others

to understand our political, social, legal, and economic systems that contribute to our emotional, intellectual, and psychological well-being. Consuming food is a biological necessity, but its deeper emotional and cultural meaning arises through memory (Parasecoli, 2007). Parasecoli's "Hungry Engrams: Food and Non-Representational Memory" (2007) looks to understand how cooking is linked to emotions and memory through the senses and hunger and thirst. "The power of food memories on everyday functionality, even if often unconscious, and their presence since prenatal life, place them in a special position to demonstrate the importance of non-representational memory" (Parasecoli, 2007, p. 107). Food has a significant influence on our well-being because it is tied to our memories. Parasecoli explains that we are recreating these memories each time we engage with certain foods.

Food and identity

Speaking and interacting with Italian immigrants in the United States, Fabio Parasecoli (2014) observed the transformation of certain dishes and utilization of ingredients as the Italian immigrants looked to "make sense" of the changing physical and social environment. Parasecoli organizes these transformative interactions with foodways into four categories: personal, communal, collective, and institutional. The personal considers the production, preparation, and consumption of food. The surrounding environment influences these processes of preparation, collection, production, and consumption of new foods, depending on what is available. External forces elicit emotional responses to certain foods as some emotional experiences trigger specific memories. "While easing the anxieties caused by the constant and invasive exposure to Otherness, communal practices such as food preparation, shopping, and

celebratory meals simultaneously strengthen a sense of belonging through specific ingredients, dishes, and practice from the migrants' place of origin" (Parasecoli, 2014, pp. 419–420). Due to changing accessibility to certain ingredients, food production can go through various levels of transformation. Parasecoli discusses how, while immigrants may want to engage with "comfort" foods, the preparation and possible consumption of the dish may mark them as "outsiders," especially when considering the smell and flavor of the food. Other practices, people, and societal conventions may influence these engagements with the personal aspects of foodways, thus creating a sense of community (Parasecoli, 2014). "Collective experiences are supposed to be shared by individuals and groups that might not be in direct contact but somehow share the same origin and story" (Parasecoli, 2014, p. 421). Despite coming from unique locations, friends, acquaintances, and formed communities begin to share recipes and exchange ingredients. Parasecoli recognizes that the "identification and reproduction of foodways" is essential in the experience of immigrant communities, as this remembrance "establishes boundaries and secures stability" (Parasecoli, 2014, p. 419).

While analyzing texts on food and belonging, Anita Manurr writes, "Food becomes both intellectual and emotional anchor for her as an immigrant subject, psychically transporting Katak to her geographically and temporally distant childhood home and giving her a sense of rootedness in the United States" (Mannur, 2009, p. 27). As discussed previously, Parasecoli also explains that this transportation to nostalgia is rooted in engaging the human senses. Manurr introduces the concept of "culinary citizenship," which allows an individual to claim "identitarian positions" through relationships with food.

Food and community

Sharing a meal acts to reinforce emotional ties with family and friends and widen communities, acting to fuel personal health (Dunbar, 2017). Analyzing results from a UK national survey that looked at social aspects of food, Dunbar found that people who eat socially are more likely to have a communal network that can support them emotionally and are generally happier (Dunbar, 2017). Dunbar's findings also revealed that those who ate a meal with another person had an increased sense of belonging within a community. In this study, Dunbar saw that laughter, reminiscing, and alcohol increased endorphins.

Sharing meals holds the power to be meaningful because it requires us to be present with one another, and the process of cooking and gathering is intentional. While examining the spiritual aspects of communal meals, Rebecca Katz writes, "Sharing food cultivates community because the implications of the meal extend beyond the time of eating together. While there are other places people meet, gathering around a meal is the most accessible because if nothing else, everyone must eat" (Katz, 2012, p. ii). Eating food acts to break social tensions while introducing people to new cultures, cuisines, and experiences. When considering how to build community centered around food, Katz outlines multiple ways to build a community through food: avoid doing work during mealtime, be consistent with meal details (seating arrangement, meeting time, etc.), consider hosting a potluck/combined meal, ask icebreakers, be conscious of dietary restrictions, wash hands after the meal, and "be present" (Katz, 2012, p. 44). Food fulfills our biological, emotional, spiritual, and communal needs.

METHODOLOGY

The nature of my project is deeply personal, filled with vulnerable narratives of identity and food. Therefore, I relied on personal interviews to collect data, which became the basis of a narrative, qualitative analysis. After obtaining IRB approval, I sent out recruitment emails and hung posters in the student union. Individuals wishing to participate in personal interviews reached out to me directly, and I provided them with the required consent forms before setting up interviews. Participants self-selected, and if they identified as international graduate students, they were eligible for the study. After the interviews, participants were assigned a number to protect their identity. The IRB process regulated how I collected data and protected identities. Six recorded interviews were conducted with international graduate students. The participants are from five different countries, and two of them have lived in more than one country during their lives. The interviews took place both in person and over Zoom and lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. I asked open-ended questions (Appendix B), allowing participants to share meaningful stories. While sharing, many interviewees provided deeper insights than what more specific questions might have elicited. After the interviews were conducted, I transcribed and analyzed the recordings.

I particularly looked to understand participant's experiences and interactions with food through the process of storytelling. Peterson (2009) analyzes communication and analysis through "making storytelling." "A person becomes a storyteller by making a story or a narrative out of the events of experience, both real and imaginary. And the storyteller makes that story into a communication event by telling it to and for an audience" (Peterson, 2009). One of the issues with storytelling as a communication

method is that the researcher or audience can potentially miss out on the main point of the storyteller.

In interpreting the results themselves, I considered Qian's (2012) method of examining data within the environment in which an experience occurs. Qian (2012) and Langellier and Peterson (2004) aim to interpret the result through their own lived experiences rather than taking on the role of "authority" or trying to be entirely "objective." As Hui (2012) describes, the process of considering data and stories through the entire context of how, where, and why they are happening helps to avoid the cherry-picking of information. Peterson (2009) defines this process of analysis as the "journey of discovery" (Peterson, 2009, p. 150) rather than the search for specific information within data. Despite asking the same series of questions to the participants, the diverse use of food revealed itself in all its dynamic forms. As discussed later, the role of certain meals and consumption of foods manifested in various ways and themes for the interviewees. The results were organized into thematic groups as certain patterns arose across the six interviews. The number of participants is a limitation of the study, and while this does not diminish the information presented in the themes, there are certainly different experiences among other international graduate students who were not interviewed.

RESULTS

After I transcribed and read through the six interviews, several major themes emerged, and I organized them into five major categories: accessibility, care, nutrition, community, and identity. Each theme begins with participants' quotations and corresponding time stamps from their interviews that illustrate the core of each topic. Like the nature of foodways, where the political, social, communal, and personal aspects of food are deeply interconnected, the following themes are also intertwined. Without access to certain ingredients, the well-being of other aspects of the self and community is impacted.

Theme 1: Accessibility

“It wasn't the same like it wasn't the same taste, but it was the closest thing I could find, so I use that” (Participant 1, 11:21).

“Not having a car is a very big barrier between international students and getting good quality food. Not all of them can navigate a bus schedule because of the differences with their schedule” (Participant 1, 33:54).

“If we don't demand for products, they don't sell [them]” (Participant 3, 15:47).

Sometimes, I also eat in the dining halls where my kind of Indian food, especially vegetarian options, I feel are very limited. So, most of the time, even though there is some form of rice, beans, [and] curry available, the preparation is different so although I eat a little bit but then it's not what how I prefer it (Participant 5, 06:29).

When asked how easy it is to find ingredients in Orono and the greater Bangor area, participants explained that local grocery stores like Hannaford and Walmart do not carry many of the spice mixes or varieties of proteins that these individuals are used to consuming. However, several participants mentioned that Orono's The Store Ampersand and the Natural Living Center in Bangor carry ingredients that can be suitable substitutes. Several of the participants mentioned that they would travel to Lewiston, Portland, and

Boston for ingredients. Participant 2 travels as far as Washington, D.C., to stock up on spices. Participant 3 visited Boston for a week, and while she was there, she ate at Brazilian restaurants and shopped at Brazilian markets. “I was homesick half the year in my second semester. It was terrible...When I went to Boston, oh, my God, was amazing...[It] refreshed me, refreshed my hope, and my confidence in everything. I almost forgot where I was, I almost forgot who I was, you know, who I am” (Participant 3, 22:43).

Participant 1 explained that the Black Bear Exchange (BBE), a center that provides free food and clothing to the University of Maine community, is an important resource for international students on campus. Those who utilize the BBE’s services can conveniently walk to the north side of campus, omitting the need for transportation, and individuals can still access fresh produce at little to no cost. While the Black Bear Exchange aids in addressing these barriers, its structure and means of getting food do not allow it to provide as many culturally significant products. Three participants cited that the dining halls on campus do not provide diverse options for protein, like fish and beans. Similarly, Participants 1 and 3 explained that they preferred the dining halls on campus before the merger with Sodexo as there was a greater variety of meals.

Another barrier to access is time. All the participants are in their second or third year of their graduate programs. Participant 1 said, “Because I'm a graduate student, my class ends at 7:30 pm in Dunn Hall, and then York dinner ends [around that time]. So, right after the class is over, I have to just pick up all of my stuff. I don't have time for questions, and then I have to go from Dunn to York [Dining Hall], eat some food, and

then be out of there like 8 pm” (Participant 1, 19:36). York and Hilltop Dining Halls lock their doors at 8 pm.

Because of these barriers to access, the international graduate students in this study resort to ordering ingredients online, which can be more expensive. Participant 3 explained that even if you buy an item online, its freshness is not guaranteed.

Participant 1 told a Russian folk story where a soldier returning from war stumbles upon a witch’s house in the woods and asks for something to eat. The greedy witch denies him any food. Cleverly, the soldier asks her for an axe. After some time, he returns to her house and asks for some buckwheat, and the witch gives him some. He then asks her for some butter and other ingredients, and she gives them to him. Participant 1 explained, “You can cook from anything; anything can be mushed together, and it can be created into a very nice meal. You don't have to have a lot of ingredients, or you don't have ingredients to be very elaborate” (Participant 1, 32:02). This folk story illustrates many of the themes discussed in this thesis, including care through reciprocity and generosity, resourcefulness, and hospitality.

Theme 2: Care

“...it's not what, it's how it's prepared. It's [the food] basically what we have every place, but it's made with so much care. It's almost like a hug. It's so well prepared. And we have some words that we don't have any English or we don't have here. It's ‘capricho.’ It's a word we use when we do things carefully, caring, and with love, and doing the best we can. It's a way to express what this word means. So, this [Brazilian] cuisine is amazing” (Participant 3, 18:49).

“Food and care and emotional attachment. I think they all go hand in hand together” (Participant 2, 06:38).

In this theme, I explore participants' articulations related to the emotional aspects of food. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Participant 2 lived with

her family in one of the largest cities in Southeast Asia. During this time, she began developing her culinary skills. “Food, the idea of food, gives me a lot of comfort. It’s during the pandemic when we were all locked up inside with closed doors, so the pantry was always filled with snacks and food. I have always loved good food, but that is where I started leaning towards food...as comfort” (Participant 2, 08:05). Participant 2 recalled a particularly memorable night when, after seeing multiple videos on the Internet, she decided to learn how to make shrimp biryani. She explained that the shrimp biryani takes a particularly long time to make. “The rice takes 13 spices to make and the gravy and all that also takes about eight to nine spices and then you have to simmer and cook on a slow heat...it tastes heavenly maybe but then the cooking takes a lot of time” (Participant 2, 21:25). At midnight, after preparing the meal for over three hours, Participant 3 sat with her parents, and they shared the meal together—with the need for over ten spices and the hours it takes to make, the shrimp biryani is a labor of love. After that night, Participant 3 identified with the dish, and she cited it as her favorite dish to date. “I always have this particular pot that I bring, and I save this for my biryani, and it makes me feel comfortable like dragging it in or from one part of the world to the other” (Participant 3, 28:08).

Participant 3 shared how, in Brazilian culture, food is made with consistent care for the preparation of a dish. “It’s almost like a hug” (Participant 3, 18:52). Participant 3 elaborated that in Brazil, especially in the state of Minas Gerais, high-quality ingredients are intentionally used as much as possible. Similarly, Participant 2 discussed the ritual of bringing Indian candy and sweets whenever you visit someone’s home as a symbol of reciprocity and hospitality.

Theme 3: Nutrition

“In America, breakfasts are far from ideal. They're either very fatty, oily, or sweet. Both of that is really bad for you, especially the sweet thing because if you eat sugar, the first thing in the morning that spikes your insulin” (Participant 1, 13:53).

“Everything is so fresh, high quality [in Brazil]” (Participant 3, 19:00).

Participant 4 comes from an island in Southeast Asia, where much of the diet consists of fish. While Maine has a significant fishing industry, Participant 4 does not particularly enjoy Atlantic salmon or other popular fish varieties here. As a result, this participant was not consuming such high levels of fish as they had at home, and her doctors recommended she take fish oil tablets to supplement her omega-3 levels. Likewise, despite not consuming much chicken in her home country, Participant 4 started eating more chicken for protein to balance her diet. “In [the] initial days, I feel like this is not taste. I want what we had in our country, but after three to four months, I [am] used to that now” (Participant 4, 27:43).

As a student in the food science program, Participant 3 explained that the way the United States raises cattle is entirely different from how the cattle are raised in Brazil. According to Participant 3, in Brazil, 90% of the cattle are free-range, while only 10% are confined. As a result, Brazilian cattle have a different composition in their milk, which Participant 3 explains is more nutritious than what we have in the U.S.

Participants 1, 3, and 5 shared experiences with the dietary differences in breakfast between their home country and the United States. Despite being from varying home countries, these participants explained that, traditionally, breakfast consists of black tea, toast, an egg, and some fruit. “In America, breakfasts are far from ideal. They're either very fatty, oily, or sweet” (Participant 1, 13:53). Half the participants shared

worries about gaining weight from the food in the United States. The participants certainly recognize the dietary and nutritional differences between food consumed in their home countries and that in the United States

Theme 4: Community

“When I come here, I feel like they are doing everything isolated. They cook their own foods. But, I found something interesting in the potlucks. The potluck is not something I found in our culture. But when I come here, I used to go [to] some of my friends’ potlucks and we can share the foods with different foods” (Participant 4, 14:12).

“It’s not only the drink. It’s the whole experience” (Participant 3, 33:34).

“Sitting in a group and sharing the same food creates that feeling of living in a community and sharing the same culture, although we are from different cultures” (Participant 5, 14:09).

“It makes you feel more connected. Maybe homely? Like you feel that someone is waiting for you. Someone is needing you. It’s [a] very close, friendly circle” (Participant 6, 16:25).

Participants 1, 5, and 6 live in the only on-campus graduate housing, Stodder Hall. In Stodder Hall, the community cooks and eats together at least five times per week. Participant 1 explained that the person who cooks many of the meals missed that people in her country always came to the table and ate together. “She feels very alone and out of place when it's not the same, so that is why she's cooking so much and inviting everybody to sit down” (Participant 1, 33:33). Participants 5 and 6 often help prepare the meals for the Stodder Hall residents. Especially within Stodder Hall, participants 1, 5, and 6 explained their excitement to try new foods and learn how to make them:

That has been a great source of friendship for me. Because of sharing, I've been able to create so many connections and learn about their cultures because some of the ingredients that I use are common with their cuisines also, there's a little variation here and there and the name is different. So, it's also interesting for me to know how they use it, what they call it...It almost feels like an eating with a family (Participant 5, 13:20).

Participant 6 echoed the sentiments above, explaining the growth of her friendships while cooking and her excitement to try new things. “I would say the food is also way better when you prepare [it]...The only issue is time management” (Participant 6, 10:28).

Participant 3 shared that in Brazil, there is a communal practice of sharing maté, also known as chimarrão, a caffeinated tea made from dried yerba maté leaves. She explained that you typically pass the cup of maté around in a circle, sharing a straw. “We share the same cup, the glass, and we don't share only to drink, but our experience is too. I used to do this with my neighbors and my friends every weekend” (Participant 3, 33:54). Participant 3 had returned to Brazil over winter break and brought three bags of maté back with her, transporting this experience to Orono. Likewise, she said that she planned to host a yerba maté-sharing event with her friends from South America and Latin America.

Theme 5: Identity

“Food is just such an important part of comfort, that every time I cook it, I think about my family. I think about being home, and with not being home for almost two years, that's a very nice memory to have” (Participant 1, 39:35).

“I really love food, but then, when I came on my Fulbright to the U.S., I was very surprised to find myself cooking...the first few things that I cooked were Indian food. I was like, oh, that's strange because I never was aware that I'm so fond of Indian food. Whenever you start cooking, you cook something that you really like something that reminds you of home, maybe some emotional connect” (Participant 2, 08:38).

All the participants said they remember their home countries through food. Food is a way for them to maintain their cultural identity. Participant 1 has not returned home in two years because of the political tension between Russia and the United States since

the start of the Russian-Ukraine War. Participant 1 explained in detail how she uses food to remember her home and family. Despite not being able to visit home directly,

Participant 1 explained that her mom finds a way to send her Russian sweets:

Russia is disconnected from the rest of the world, which means that I cannot send anything from the U.S. to Russia because there's no postal connections. There's no planes flying that way, like nothing. But for some reason, I don't know how, my mom can send stuff from Russia to here. She sent me candy (Participant 1, 24:28).

Participant 1 shared other meaningful moments remembering her home. One of her favorite dishes is borscht, a Russian beetroot soup topped with sour cream and parsley. “It [borscht] just reminds me of home so much because my mom and my grandma usually make it” (Participant 1, 04:59). Participant 1 also recalled visiting her grandparents at their “dacha,” a summer country house, which had a bountiful garden. “She [My grandmother] would tell us, okay, girls, what I need is 15 cucumbers, I need three things of dill. I want you to go get some peppers. I want you to go get some leaves from the black currant bushes...we felt like little witches, you know, we're doing something cool” (Participant 1, 30:28).

Participant 2 grew up between two continents, and her experiences in these two places inform the diversity of things she enjoys cooking and the cultural fusion present in her meals. “I would call myself self-taught because I don't follow most of the things my mother follows. I enjoy what she [my mom] cooks for me, but then I experiment on my own” (Participant 2, 29:36). However, for Participant 2, one of the defining characteristics of her palate is how spicy a dish is. For her, the spicier an Indian dish is, the more “authentic” it is. While visiting restaurants across the East Coast, Participant 2

remarked how restaurateurs must cater to Indian, American, European, and other non-Indian palates.

DISCUSSION

Storytelling can allow for a deeper connection between the storyteller and the listener (McCall et al., 2021). “ST [Storytelling] involves a process of triggering participant memories and crafting these into a story” (McCall et al., 2021). For me, one of the most meaningful parts of the interviews was when participants shared food memories from their childhood, the COVID-19 pandemic, and traditions.

My results show that international graduate students utilize food to maintain their cultural identity. Barriers such as time, energy, cost, and access to ingredients and transportation inhibit how often these students can engage in these cultural practices, but many of the participants, especially those living in Stodder Hall, showed a willingness and excitement to try new food and experiences. Likewise, the three participants (1, 5, and 6) living in the on-campus housing mentioned the “fun,” “friendship,” and “good company for dinner” present for the daily dinners in Stodder Hall. All the participants said their friends in America enjoy trying their food. “When I live with my American friends, they sometimes get red with my spices” (Participant 4, 17:35).

Other findings include how cultural foods are transformed based on ingredient access. For example, Participant 3 said many of her dishes require green chilies, which are difficult to find in the Orono area. Therefore, she substitutes red chili powder, but “the flavor is not strong enough” (Participant 3, 11:10). With limited access to some ingredients and other preparation factors and a willingness to adapt, food and recipes are inevitably transformed to meet an individual's needs (Parasecoli, 2014). Likewise, while recipes can be passed down through generations, personal interpretation, ingredient access, and culinary preferences add to the transformation of the dish. Through the

process of adaptation and trying new cuisines, there is a fusion of cultures and culinary dishes that arise. Analyzing the fusion of dishes in Stodder Hall is certainly a point for future research.

Several participants also expressed concerns about nutrition and the highly processed foods in the United States. The concept of comfort food is generally linked to “home, tradition, nostalgia, and positive feelings” (Jones & Long, 2019, p. 1). Jones and Long (2019) challenge how modernity, alienation, and removal from food production trigger our need for comfort and familiarity. Since local grocery stores do not carry many ingredients, individuals are forced to order items online or travel to Lewiston, Portland, Boston, and other cities. The campus also lacks diverse protein sources (e.g., beans, lentils, fish), which impacts students who are used to more vegetable-based diets.

Food cannot be divorced from the physical environment in which preparation, consumption, and production occur. When considering Maine legislation, the Maine Food Sovereignty Act aims to provide locally produced goods for Mainers. However, the act also privileges specific food production systems, creating a lack of accessibility to certain ingredients. The Maine Food Sovereignty Act ensures the “improved health and well-being” (The Maine Food Sovereignty Act, 2017, p. 1) of Mainers, yet many residents cannot experience their cultural practices due to the lack of ingredients in local stores. These students are forced to renegotiate cultural traditions to what is readily available in central Maine—addressing this gap is grounded in community needs and interests. The inability to access certain ingredients reflects a deeper systemic issue in the state that impacts UMaine students. Participant 3 said that unless they demand the ingredients in grocery stores, some products will not be on the shelves. One of the issues

may be that local grocery stores in the Orono and greater Bangor area are unaware of the diversity in customers and their food choices, or the population of some groups may be too small for it to be economically viable for the stores to stock certain ingredients. Anecdotally, the local Hannaford in Orono is receptive to feedback on supplying culturally significant foods.

Participant 2 reflected on the “authenticity” of Indian cuisines, measured by how spicy a dish is. Through the transformation of meals, how “authentic” is a dish? Does authenticity matter? Participant 1 said, “There's a saying in Russian that if a woman knows how to make borscht, that means that she is becoming a real Russian woman...like, oh, you can get married now because you know how to make borscht” (Participant 2, 05:09). Considering Parasecoli’s categories of transformation, the perception of whether a food is authentic is governed by both public and private institutions. Parasecoli writes that an institution “regulate[s] the production of foods perceived as traditional and connected to a specific territory, manufacturing techniques, and even sensory characteristics, influencing the way those foods are actually made and experienced around the world” (Parasecoli, 2014, p. 422). While authenticity was not something I explicitly examined in my honors thesis, it is something worth researching further in the future. Additionally, the fusion of culinary cuisines and cultures adds nuance to discussions of authenticity. Discussions of appropriation and appreciation arise in these cases, and at the root of remaining respectful is the importance of listening and learning.

Through months of isolation, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed many of us to crave and create community. Popular meals such as Thanksgiving dinner, birthdays, and

other celebrations could not take place with large gatherings. However, the COVID-19 pandemic also became a time for families, friends, roommates, and other immediate communities to take the time to eat with one another. The Family Dinner Project conducted a research survey that found that family dinners in the United States increased by 50% during the pandemic (Fishel, 2021). Participants explained they felt more connected to one another during dinnertime; there was more laughter; children helped in the kitchen more; and spoke about news and politics more (Fishel, 2021). When away from biological or childhood families, people create family in their new communities as a way to emphasize the significance of sharing a meal together. In Stodder Hall, the practice of eating with one another facilitates an environment of friendship and care. Likewise, culinary and food traditions do not need to originate from one's childhood. For Participant 2, her love for shrimp biryani arose during the pandemic; traditions can begin at any time. Food provides us with a sense of belonging, no matter where we are, and allows us to express ourselves culturally, emotionally, communally, and personally.

CONCLUSION

My findings show that the international graduate students I interviewed on the University of Maine campus utilize food to maintain a sense of cultural identity. Like Qian's (2012) study of Chinese sojourners on the UMaine campus, participants in this study embraced new foods and customs while simultaneously maintaining a sense of cultural pride and tradition. Addressing barriers to diverse food options can help all students feel more welcomed and empowered in the UMaine community. Similarly, the lack of certain ingredients transforms a recipe's "authenticity" (the taste, texture, spice levels, etc.), and students adapt the dish to fit their needs and resources. Food and meal sharing are essential opportunities for all students to build relationships and meaningful connections. For example, participants living in Stodder Hall, the on-campus graduate housing, described the "family" like community created through their nearly daily co-created and shared dinners. Other on-campus food events, like the Dinner and Dialogues at the Wilson Center, reinforce community and belonging.

AFTERWORD

I hope this study demonstrates the necessity for the University of Maine, local grocery stores, and the community as a whole to address barriers to cultural engagement. Resources on campus that aim to create inclusive environments for students include the TRIO program, the Black Bear Exchange, the Black Bear Mutual Aid Fund, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, and the Wilson Center. Additionally, partnerships with local grocery stores, markets, and the UMaine dining halls may be fruitful in getting certain ingredients and products. Food events have flourished on campus within the last year, and engaged attendance at these events has proved massively beneficial for cultural awareness.

The potluck I hosted on April 13, 2024, demonstrated many of the key findings discussed in the paper. Hosting the potluck allowed me to give back to my participants while engaging with a meaningful community—this is both physically, emotionally, and spiritually nurturing for me. As I reflected afterward, the process of coming together despite the political and social circumstances of the world is deeply moving. Food and foodways hold immense promise for change, compassion, and transformative conversations.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Form & Approval

APPLICATION COVER PAGE

- KEEP THIS PAGE AS ONE PAGE – DO NOT CHANGE MARGINS/FONTS!!!!!!!!!!
- PLEASE SUBMIT THIS PAGE AS WORD DOCUMENT

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH WITH HUMAN SUBJECTS
Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, 311 Alumni Hall

(Type inside gray areas)

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:	Elizabeth DuDevoir	EMAIL:	elizabeth.dudevoir@maine.edu
CO-INVESTIGATOR:		EMAIL:	
CO-INVESTIGATOR:		EMAIL:	
FACULTY SPONSOR:	Dr. Daniel Sandweiss	EMAIL:	daniels@maine.edu
(Required if PI is a student):			
TITLE OF PROJECT:	Sustaining community and identity through food at the University of Maine		
START DATE:	12/04/2023	PI DEPARTMENT:	Anthropology

STATUS OF PI: FACULTY/STAFF/GRADUATE/UNDERGRADUATE U (F,S,G,U)

If PI is a student, is this research to be performed:

for an honors thesis/senior thesis/capstone

Submitting the application indicates the principal investigator's agreement to abide by the responsibilities outlined in Section I.E. of the Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects.

Faculty Sponsors are responsible for oversight of research conducted by their students. The Faculty Sponsor ensures that he/she has read the application and that the conduct of such research will be in accordance with the University of Maine's Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research. **REMANDER:** if the principal investigator is an undergraduate student, the Faculty Sponsor MUST submit the application to the IRB.

Email this cover page and complete application to umric@maine.edu.

FOR IRB USE ONLY Application # 2023-10-12 Review (F/E): E Expedited Category:
ACTION TAKEN:

Judged Exempt; category 2 Modifications required? Y Accepted (date) 11/07/2023
Approved as submitted. Date of next review: by Degree of Risk:
Approved pending modifications. Date of next review: by Degree of Risk:
Modifications accepted (date):
Not approved (see attached statement)
Judged not research with human subjects

FINAL APPROVAL TO BEGIN

Date 12/04/2023

10/2018

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What is your country of origin?
2. How long did you live there?
3. What is your favorite food from your country?
4. How long have you lived in Stodder Hall?
5. How many times per week do you cook?
6. Do you eat at the dining hall or in Orono at all?
7. What food do you prefer to eat?
8. What meals do you frequently cook?
9. What kind of ingredients do you need to prepare the food?
10. Where do you shop for your ingredients, and can you easily find those ingredients in Orono?
11. Can you tell me about a food you often eat and the story behind it?
12. Do you share meals with other people?
13. If so, how often?
14. Do you feel connected to your cultural background through food?
15. What kinds of emotions does the act of preparing, eating, and sharing the food elicit?

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Caty DuDevoir was born in Celaya, Mexico in 2001. She was adopted and moved to Maine in 2005. She graduated from Cheverus High School in 2020. At the University of Maine, Caty majored in Anthropology and minored in Journalism. She was an active member of Divest UMS, the news editor and editor-in-chief of The Maine Campus Newspaper, and president of the Anthropology Club. Caty is a member of the Honors College, Phi Beta Kappa, Lambda Alpha National Anthropology Honor Society, and Phi Kappa Phi. She has accepted an offer to study at the University of Massachusetts Amherst for a doctorate in Cultural Anthropology.