# Eating (with) the other : Staging hope and trouble through culinary conviviality

Community Food Initiatives
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# 10 Eating (with) the other

## Staging hope and trouble through culinary conviviality

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### Introduction

In different cities across the world, we have seen a sharp rise in community food initiatives aimed at spurring social change and inclusion through practices of cooking and eating together (Davies et al., 2017; Davies, 2019; Edwards, 2021; Marovelli, 2018; Smith & Harvey, 2021). Each of these social innovations in commensality and conviviality is responding to unique characteristics, tensions, and conflicts in their localities, the needs of the populations they serve, and broader geopolitical forces that affect the dynamics of mobility and migration to these places.

In this chapter, I examine two community cooking initiatives that seek to valorise the culinary heritage, knowledge, and foodways of migrants in New York City and Berlin. In New York City, the *League of Kitchens* places a special emphasis on valorising the skills of immigrant women by staging paid in-home cooking workshops. In Berlin, *Über den Tellerrand* offers paid workshops and community cooking events at Kitchen Hub that provide a setting for refugees and asylum seekers to share their food culture with locals. In different ways, these community food initiatives use food knowledge, cooking, and eating to address the troubles of racism and xenophobia. They offer migrants and locals the hope of cross-cultural friendships and social networks, whilst generating employment opportunities for people who are marginalised from the labour market and devalued in the food service industry. The relative success of these initiatives depends on the emotional and performative labour of cooks who stage authenticity and identity and on the desires of an affluent group of consumers and food enthusiasts who are willing to pay a premium for these experiences. This chapter examines how cooks and eaters within these initiatives navigate the power asymmetries of this transaction in their shared desire for transformative culinary encounters.

### Eating difference: conviviality, commensality, and intercultural encounters

In popular media and academic literature, the idea that "food connects" and helps people understand, empathise, and overcome difference is widely celebrated. "We all eat," or so the saying goes. This hopeful appraisal of culinary conviviality relies

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on the belief that the practice of commensality (Dunbar, 2017), the act of eating together, can bring everyone to the same level in spite of existing power inequalities. This is part of a broader trend in community food initiatives that emphasise the power of food to solve a variety of troubles ranging from health inequalities to poverty, environmental awareness, and social exclusion (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes Conroy, 2013).

A growing body of food studies scholarship examines food as a site of multi-cultural encounter, commensality, and conviviality (Wise, 2012; Molz, 2007; Heldke, 2005; Johnston & Bauman, 2015). According to Wise and Noble (2016), conviviality, or the capacity to live together, has become "the latest groovy thing" in social theory. Investigations of conviviality address fundamental sociological concerns related to gifting, reciprocity, and community formation and contestation. Rather than viewing conviviality as "happy togetherness" they argue "that conviviality is useful only if it is understood in a very specific way; a way that includes potential ambivalence at the heart of the everydayness of living together" (2016, p. 425). While conviviality is often observed in the moment, as a vibe, or an assumed outcome of commensality, Phull et al. (2015) go a step further to analyse the conditions that allow culinary conviviality, or the pleasure of eating together, to happen. They are also mindful of the social function of eating together, which can include segregation, division, and group formation. "The way we eat and whom we eat with is symbolic of the way society divides itself through class, kinship, age or occupation and may result in social exclusion for those not part of commensal circles" (Kerner et al., 2015; Phull et al., 2015, p. 979). In other words, conviviality doesn't just "happen" when people eat together, rather "a group needs to 'play by the rules' of sociable interactions to construct a pleasant eating event. It is in this way that conviviality may differ from commensality" (Phull et al., 2015, p. 979). From this perspective, we can begin to view culinary conviviality, the pleasurable act of eating together, as the outcome of a number of cultural, emotional, and social performances that are situated and staged in kitchens and around tables. Following Wise and Noble (2016), it is also important to consider that culinary conviviality may not always be (equally) pleasurable and can come with conflict and tension in the negotiation of differences and power inequalities.

The extent to which such intercultural culinary convivialities are transformative (and for whom) or fall into the trap of culinary colonialism and exoticism is widely debated (Alkon & Grosglik, 2021; Heldke, 2013; Wise, 2012). The black feminist scholar bell hooks coined the term "eating the Other" to describe the ways in which Otherness has been commodified as a "seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (1992, p. 366). Encounters with the Other can serve to reinforce "white racism, imperialism, and sexist domination" for consumers and eaters who assert their power and privilege while enhancing their cultural and culinary capital through acts of "courageous consumption" (hooks, 1992, pp. 378–379). This dynamic is captured vividly by food journalist Soleil Ho (2014) and comic artist Shing Yin Khor (2014), who both illustrate the manifold ways in which adventure seeking "Foodies" (see, for example, Johnston and Bauman 2015) engage in acts of cultural appropriation in their quest for authenticity,

identity, and status through consuming "ethnic" cuisine and converting this to cultural capital. In a critical self-reflection on her own penchant for "ethnic" foods from economically dominated cultures, philosopher Lisa Heldke (2013) recognises an attitude she names "cultural food colonialism." While genuinely respectful and curious about other food cultures, she also observes, "I was motivated by a deep desire to have contact with – to somehow own an experience – of an exotic Other as a way of making myself more interesting" (Heldke, 2013, p. 395).

A less extractive account of eating across differences is captured by Alkon and Grosglik (2021) in their analysis of Anthony Bourdain's food travel television show. In contrast to the now familiar trope of "eating *the* Other" (hooks, 1992), the authors also identify "eating *with* the Other" which they describe as "a warm and respectful entree into the everyday realities of racial, ethnic, and immigrant communities" (2021, p. 10). In these respectful encounters, "hosts are eating with the Other as relative equals, sharing food, conversation, and commensality" (2021, p. 6). However, considering the power geometries within which such encounters take place, they can also "operate as a slippery slope towards trends of eating *the* other, when discourses and engagements with the foods of the other people are revealed as a means of reinforcing racial and class hegemonies" (2021, p. 11). However, as several authors (Wise, 2012; Heldke, 2005) make clear, there is very little that separates eating *with* the Other from eating *the* Other, and variables such as setting, performance, food, and general vibe can tip the balance and trigger a range of positive and negative emotions in participants.

The emotions of desire and discomfort are key to understanding respectful (eating *with* the Other) and disrespectful (eating *the* Other) intercultural culinary encounters and can shape how transformative these encounters are (and for whom). Like the categories of hope and trouble, the emotions of desire and discomfort are not entirely separate, and may co-exist in the same experience for different actors and within individual actors. As hooks reminds us, desire in itself is not problematic and can even be transformative, "Acknowledging ways the desire for pleasure, and that includes erotic longings, informs our politics, our understanding of difference, we may know better how desire disrupts, subverts, or makes resistance possible" (1992, p. 380). Discomfort on the other hand tends to be actively avoided in culinary encounters across difference, in favour of a normative form of conviviality as "happy togetherness." As Wise observes in her research on everyday multiculturalism, there is an assumed positivity to such encounters, "initiatives often simply assume that eating the food of the 'Other' in intercultural situations will have positive outcomes for race and interethnic relations." (2012, p. 84). In a similar vein, Alkon and Grosglik observe an emphasis on pleasure, positive feelings, and comfort to render the Other and their foods, palatable and comfortable for presumed white viewers and eaters. They argue that "connections across difference *require* discomfort if they are to challenge hierarchical social relations" (2021, p. 10). Wise elegantly weaves these dimensions of discomfort and desire together when she writes, "[food] can be a the subject of disgust and desire, mediating cultural difference in multicultural settings . . . because it is at once everyday, deeply embodied, and yet so symbolic of difference" (2012, p. 83).

However, Wise also makes clear that it is much more than food that mediates cultural difference. In response to the significant but often oversimplified "role of food in constructing, reconstructing and mediating cultural differences" (2012, p. 85), Wise asks, "under what conditions do experiences of 'otherness' through food make cosmopolitans or contribute to positive relationships across difference?" (2012, p. 85). She finds that it matters deeply who is eating with whom, where, and in what kind of setting. This chapter seeks to build on Wise's question, by exploring how community food initiatives are creating settings for convivial intercultural culinary encounters, the types of performances that constitute these encounters, and the role of setting, performance, desire, and discomfort in negotiating the power asymmetries of eating with others.

The dynamics of hope and trouble are evident in these different readings of commensality, conviviality, and intercultural culinary encounters. They can be found in the hopeful positivity that is often attributed to eating *with* the Other, as well as the ever-present dynamic of eating with *the* Other and the troubles of exoticism, colonialism, and white supremacy that feed this dynamic. On a more micro level there is great potential to explore hope and trouble in performances and experiences of intercultural culinary conviviality, by attending to emotions linked to hope and trouble, and following the flows of desire and discomfort that can be triggered and shared – in acts of cooking and eating together. This chapter examines these dynamics in two community food initiatives dedicated to staging intercultural encounters through cooking and eating together.

## Background and methods

This chapter is based on ethnographic research conducted in Berlin and New York in the winter and summer of 2017. The research was conducted as part of a larger EU project on the sustainability potential of urban food sharing (SHARECITY, n.d., Davies, 2019). Case studies were developed in each city to capture different types of food sharing including communal growing, surplus food redistribution, cooking and eating together, and multi-functionality. In our scoping study (Davies et al., 2017) we encountered a diversity of initiatives that stage culinary conviviality through cooking and eating together, including informal and non-profit initiatives that cook and share surplus food (e.g. Food not Bombs, KuFA -Kitchen for All, Disco soup), as well as for-profit social dining platforms (Eatwith). We selected *Über den Tellerrand* (Berlin) and *League of Kitchens* (NYC) as comparative case studies because they both used cooking and eating together to respond to dynamics of migration in their respective cities.

In the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis in Berlin, activism and social entrepreneurship grew up around the needs of people who had been forced from their homes and were living in temporary shelters (often without kitchens), while facing severe restrictions on their mobility in Germany and Europe. This took place in a broader political and cultural climate where refugees experienced significant social isolation, dehumanisation, and outright racism and xenophobia from locals and right-wing political parties. This gave rise to protests across Berlin, culminating in

the 2012–2014 occupation of Oranienplatz (a public square in Kreuzberg), where refugees, asylum seekers, local activists, and students built a protest camp. Students brought cooking equipment, cutlery, and food to set up convivial pop-up kitchens. Cooking and eating together at the camp gave rise to a number of spontaneous intercultural culinary encounters. Locals were inspired by these encounters and went on to found a number of refugee focused food initiatives in Berlin, including "*Über den Tellerrand*" (n.d.).

"*Über den Tellerrand*" (ÜDTR) operates out of a community cooking space called Kitchen Hub on a leafy residential street in the well-kept Schöneberg neighbourhood. At the time of the research, the staff and volunteers were primarily white German women in their 20s and 30s. The profile of the staff has intentionally become much more diverse since the research was completed as the organisation has grown. Organisationally ÜDTR is split between being a business (Gmbh), which offers paid cooking workshops, and a non-profit foundation (Verein), which can apply for funding to run a variety of community programmes that facilitate the sharing of food, knowledge, and skills for friendship building through community food events, language exchange, buddy programmes, beekeeping, gardening, and cultural events. All of the profits from the business are invested in the community programmes of the non-profit. The organisation also produces cookbooks with authentic regional recipes *Rezepte für ein besseres Wir* and fusion recipes *Eine Prise Heimat*, facilitates field trips and excursions, and provides informal job placement and training. Beyond Berlin, ÜDTR has launched Kitchen on the Run, a mobile community kitchen that travels across Europe, especially to places where there are tensions between refugees and locals. And there are now satellite ÜDTR projects in more than 37 cities, mostly in Germany but also in Colombia and the Czech Republic.

During the winter of 2017, I conducted participant observation at both paid cooking workshops led by refugee chefs and free community food events including: "50 Plates of . . ." a community cooking event and potluck, language cafes where migrants and locals practice a foreign language together, and cultural events and excursions. I conducted five semi-structured interviews with volunteers and staff, all of whom were white German women. I also met regularly with a group of male participants from Syria. They were not interviewed but provided significant insight into the user experience of ÜDTR. Chefs and participants tended to be male and reflected the broader demographics of the refugee population, while staff and volunteers tended to be white and female. Refugee women were less visible. There were a few paid female chefs, and I attended one workshop led by a woman from Afghanistan. In recognition of the mobility constraints that many women faced related to caring responsibilities as well as cultural taboos on going out alone or mixing in public, ÜDTR also facilitated day time women's only cooking events run by a group of Arabic refugees. These events were very important for women to socialise with one another outside of shelters, and importantly, they allowed them access to kitchen space to cook familiar foods that they brought back to their kitchen-less shelters to share. The community programmes have further expanded and diversified since this research was completed.

In the summer of 2017, as part of the SHARECITY project, I began a similar course of ethnographic fieldwork in New York City, and selected a comparative case for cooking and eating together that was also geared towards bringing different kinds of people together around the kitchen table in convivial intercultural culinary encounters. At the time of the research, New York did not have any refugee focused food sharing initiatives, which reflects the fact that the United States has accepted far fewer refugees than Europe, and has tended to settle them in remote locations. However, the troubles of racism, xenophobia, and social exclusion are prevalent. New York City is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the United States, and is home to 3.1 million immigrants, and an estimated half-million undocumented immigrants (NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, 2018). Although they may not claim refugee status, many immigrants are also economic refugees. These immigrants are the backbone of New York's restaurant industry, working as chefs, dishwashers, busboys, waiters, bartenders, and food delivery people. For undocumented people, their immigration status makes them vulnerable to extremely exploitative working conditions, and the ever-present threat of deportation. Even though New Yorkers eat meals prepared by immigrants every day, they may not know anything about their lives and cultures, and their culinary knowledge is rarely valued. "Ethnic" restaurants are expected to be cheap, and immigrant chefs are often marginalised from the world of fine dining until their flavours and recipes are appropriated and domesticated by white chefs (Ray, 2017). Historical and everyday forms of racism and colonialism reinforce these dynamics.

In 2014, the social practice artist Lisa Gross founded the "*League of Kitchens*" (LoK), with the aim of staging intercultural encounters between locals and immigrants by cooking and eating together, documenting the culinary knowledge of immigrant home cooks, and valorising this knowledge through home cooking workshops. League of Kitchens is an intentional pun on League of Nations, an international diplomacy body that preceded the UN. It signals a hope in the power of food to bring people together, facilitate intercultural culinary encounters that bridge cultural differences, and nurture a greater appreciation for the knowledge and skills that immigrants bring to our foodscape. Perhaps because of the focus on providing a platform for non-professional home cooks, all the chefs are women. This is in sharp contrast to the world of professional chefs, which is dominated by men. The gender dimensions of domestic food work are celebrated on the League of Kitchens website, which offers "meals by grandma" and boasts "a culinary dream-team of women from around the world who will welcome you into their homes, teach you their family recipes, and inspire you with their personal stories" (League of Kitchens, 2022). Cultural exchange is at the heart of LoK home cooking workshops, which offer "meaningful connection and social interaction, cultural engagement and exchange, culinary learning and discovery, and exceptional eating and drinking. Through this experience, the League of Kitchens seeks to build cross-cultural connection and understanding, to increase access to traditional cooking knowledge, and to provide meaningful, well-paid employment and training for immigrants" (League of Kitchens, 2022). As a community food initiative, LoK is accountable to the needs of the

close-knit community of chefs who make this project possible. These chefs are also part of multiple local and global communities that they invite guests to explore.

League of Kitchens is more than a platform for connecting home cooks with curious eaters: they also provide training and support to help women share their stories and skills. At the time of research, a staff anthropologist conducted interviews with each home chef to learn about her life, culture, ancestors, the place she was from, her neighbourhood, and foodscape. This interview is the basis for a highly personalised recipe booklet that is designed for each home chef and workshop. A professional recipe creator also worked closely with each chef to follow her kitchen and shopping routines and codify tacit and embodied knowledge – a pinch, a handful, etc., into standard measurements. During the course of my research, I conducted participant observation at two paid home cooking workshops with chefs in Brooklyn and Queens and performed interviews with two chefs and two staff members, all of whom were women of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. During the workshops, I had informal chats with participants, but follow-up interviews were not possible.

During participant observation and in subsequent field notes, I paid close attention to the feeling and "vibe" of the event, as well as the different emotions participants and chefs seemed to be exhibiting and sharing, through tears, laughter, gustatory sounds, faces of disgust, and other forms of body language. I also observed my own emotional and affective experiences in these spaces while handling food, chopping, tasting, and eating with others. However, it was rare that these feelings were verbalised in interviews. This points to a more general challenge in conducting qualitative research using visceral methods (Hayes-Conroy, 2010). All interviews and field notes were transcribed and coded in NVivo with a set of pre-determined codes related to goals and motivations, rules and regulations, power dynamics, etc. A second round of coding was conducted for this book chapter to examine the themes in the literature related to eating *the* other vs. eating *with* the Other, desire and discomfort, the setting, and the performance.

## Findings: staging intercultural culinary conviviality

In each initiative I observed elements of hope and trouble, which manifested around the emotions of desire and discomfort in performances of eating (with) the Other. Both participants and chefs were motivated by the hope that intercultural culinary encounters could result in respectful and convivial experiences of eating *with* the Other. However, other hopes and desires were also present, and could easily become a source of trouble and discomfort.

In paid cooking workshops, consumers often expressed a desire to acquire new knowledge and understanding. Sometimes this desire for knowledge extended beyond how to cook authentic recipes, and crossed a boundary into the acquisition of more intimate knowledge about a person's life and migration history. This could result in tensions for chefs when paying participants pressed them for details about fleeing violence and conflict, which could trigger painful memories of trauma. At the same time, migrant chefs and participants at community events sometimes

expressed desire for more than encounters – for real friendships, deep connections, and social networks that could help them thrive. In this way we can also begin to see hope and trouble as more intertwined, dashed hopes and desires can also reveal existing power inequalities and cause troubles and discomfort.

Staging culinary conviviality demands significant emotional labour from chefs, whose performances aspire towards "happy togetherness," while protecting guests from experiencing discomfort. For example, in both of the homes I visited for LoK cooking workshops, chefs took great effort to treat guests as family. Sitting them down at the table for a homemade snack and a chat as soon as they arrived, before getting down to the business of cooking together. They also went to great lengths to make their homes inviting and cosy, even if that meant displacing other family members who could interrupt the workshop or change the vibe. The conversations we had were always rich and full of detail, stories, and jokes, but we were also careful to avoid uncomfortable topics – like the causes of their migration, US immigration and economic policies, fears of deportation, and racism against immigrants.

In both organisations, I observed that attendees at paid cooking workshops were mostly women and exclusively white native-born Germans (Berlin) or Americans (New York). Workshops took place in the afternoon and evening, with fees ranging from 75 Euro to 125 USD. Attending the cooking workshops requires considerable time and economic resources. LoK home workshops were limited to about 5 people, while ÜDTR Kitchen Hub workshops could accommodate 14. The home workshops did not serve alcohol, while the Kitchen Hub workshops did. Some participants had received the course as a gift, others were using it as a shared gift for family bonding, or as a gift to themselves. Participants were people who enjoyed food and cooking and were curious about another culture. Besides curiosity and pleasure, participants were motivated by the feeling of "doing good" by supporting women immigrants in New York and refugees in Berlin.

To better understand how the dynamics of hope and trouble manifest in cooking and eating together at LoK and ÜDTR, I examine how the different emotions are triggered by particular performances and settings. Comparing the public to the private kitchen, I show how each space has been designed to support particular performances of culinary conviviality. In this section, I unpack what is happening in these encounters, the setting of the stage, the possible performances and scripts, and the experiences of desire and discomfort that may result. This reveals a number of troubles in culinary conviviality, including the risk of eating *the* Other, provoking discomfort in traumatised bodies, and accommodating the conflicting desires of guests for both adventure, exploration, safety, and familiarity.

### *Settings*

Following Wise's (2012) argument that the "social settings in which food is consumed cross-culturally matter immensely. The consumption of food always needs to be understood in relation to the settings in which it is consumed" (2012, p. 107). I begin by examining the different settings in which performances of intercultural culinary conviviality are staged, how these stages are designed, created, and shaped

by participants, and the different performances, feelings, and experiences they support.

In LoK, the stage is the family home and kitchen. These are spaces that are usually private, personal, and hidden from the public behind closed doors. They are also spaces where care, rest, and social reproduction take place, and in New York, they can often feel tiny and cramped. The stage at LoK is both spatially and socially intimate. Setting the stage and getting it ready for five strangers requires a lot of work, cleaning, and negotiating with other family members for space as well as childcare.

At ÜDTR, the stage is Kitchen Hub, a spacious and sunny community space on the ground floor with large street facing windows on two sides. It is highly visible, and the activities inside are on display to the passers-by. Kitchen Hub is located in Schöneberg, in a corner property that has been vacant for more than ten years. It brings life and activity to a quiet and leafy residential street. The interior of Kitchen Hub was meticulously designed in collaboration with architecture students from Technical University Berlin, who have created flexible working, cooking, and eating spaces out of wood and metal. Most of the furnishings have multiple uses and a modular design. One wall is lined with shelves that hold cookbooks and a few austere jars of spices. In the back there is an actual kitchen, with a refrigerator, and sink for washing up, and space for food storage. The back kitchen is where real messes can happen. The front kitchen consists of tidy islands with a sink, cooktop, cutting block, and oven. To me, the space feels very neutral, even cold. However, staff and volunteers describe the space as both neutral and warm and inviting, and they focus on the wood as a source of warmth. Decisions have been made in the design to create a functional and neutral setting that can accommodate different activities, uses, and culinary identities.

> it's just a neutral place where everyone comes together. . . . But not too neutral or too sterile either, it should still be a place where you can come in and feel comfortable, that's important.
>
> I mean it's a lot of wood, wood is already warm. . . . It's so warm, it kind of feels warm, it's nicely decorated. Different spice jars that are there with Arabic spices and then again German spices, we have books there, plants, lots of them . . . a cozy seating area.
>
> (Staff, UDTR)

Participants find the space dignified, and much more posh feeling than a rundown community centre, shelter, or apartment kitchen. Staff were concerned with creating a "positive atmosphere" and providing a reprieve from the depressing, ugly, and stressful government and administrative spaces that refugees and asylum seekers must navigate to meet their needs. Kitchen Hub also reflects a certain cosmopolitan-hipster class habitus that is most at home in minimalist mid-century modern design. The space is not personal or intimate; it has been designed for the comfort of a diversity of users. It manages to be familiar to a class of paying guests who can feel

like they are at a hip coffee bar, inviting and dignified to participants, and useful for a variety of functions – including community cooking.

The intentional and vernacular design of these spaces supports different kinds of performances of cooking and eating together. One important difference between the home kitchen and the community kitchen is the degree of autonomy and power chefs have over the design of the space, and the different roles and performances these stages support. At LoK, home chefs have complete control over their space, they are cooking in their kitchen, where they are the matriarch, even if this comes with some stress and inconvenience.

> [W]hen instructors are teaching in their home this is their space that they are welcoming people into and it just immediately sets up this feeling of hey, they're the host, the teacher, the expert, and they feel comfortable there, cooking there and being there and teaching there.
>
> (Staff, League of Kitchens)

At home surrounded by familiar objects, appliances, kitchen tools, and family photos, it is easy for chefs to slip into the familiar roles of hospitality and domesticity. The charming maternal host shows generosity but also power by serving her guests more food than they can possibly eat. The kitchen boss, who doesn't feel shy about delegating tasks, and making sure that you know how to do things "her way." This domestic stage at LoK is also disciplining for paying customers, who behave as careful and courteous guests rather than entitled customers. At the end of the cooking workshop, guests and the chef sit down at the dining table, where additional family members might join, and share a fantastic meal that they created together. The chef is still very much in charge of staging the meal; she ensures that the table is set up correctly, and the food is served and plated in a way that is beautiful to her. The setting is intimate and elegant, and by the end, guests are urging the chef to sit down, relax, and begin sharing responsibility for hospitality. In these moments of warmth, sharing, comfort, and respect, eating *with* the Other is temporarily achieved, and the Other is no longer an exotic stranger but an intimate family member or new friend.

At ÜDTR, the Kitchen Hub has been thoughtfully designed to be neutral and accommodating to a diversity of users and uses, but there is little room for chefs to make the space their own. They occupy the space as guests rather than residents, and they are on display. One volunteer observed that this can counter the aim of putting refugees and locals on equal footing.

> Put on exhibition! Like in the zoo! It's not supposed to be that way.
>
> (volunteer, ÜDTR)

For the evening, chefs can fill the space with music and smells from home, but they will always leave behind a clean slate for the next user. Within this space, refugees are on their feet and take on the professionalised roles of chef and expert. Paying

customers sit around a big table and act more like customers than guests. They are not shy about "getting what they paid for." Guests tend to socialise more with each other over a few glasses of wine, while chopping ingredients, while the chef fades into the background and does the more serious cooking. The consumption of alcohol reinforces a divide between the drinking customers and the chefs, who are mostly Muslim.

The setting during ÜDTR community events, like "50 Plates of . . . ." is entirely different. The community events are free, and the exchange of knowledge, food, and experiences is reciprocal. Afternoon light floods the space, which is full of the hum and buzz of people and ingredients mixing together. The space is more open, with the tables pushed to the side, and people are gathering and moving between different kitchen islands that are hosted by chefs from different countries, including Germany. There is a frenetic energy, as people rush around to grab ingredients and chefs delegate tasks with speed, and are not shy about telling their helper participants to hurry up or adjust their chopping technique. It feels a bit like the television show Iron Chef, where chefs are in a race against time to cook a meal using whatever ingredients have been thrown at them. After all of the meals are prepared, they are spread out buffet style on the tables that line the walls. Everyone grabs a plate to mix different meals, tastes, and cultures together, and the room becomes quiet except for the sounds of gustatory pleasure, gratitude, and appreciation. Eating *with* the Other is made possible by acts of reciprocal exchange and sharing. And as Longhurst et al. (2008) note, potluck settings where bodies, ingredients, tastes, and cultures combine in unfamiliar ways can also be moments of visceral learning where eaters confront their own desires and discomforts.

In contrast to descriptions of eating *the* Other in, for example, "ethnic" restaurants that stage authenticity, through decoration, music, and dress for tourists and mainstream white diners (Heldke, 2005; Johnston & Bauman, 2015), both initiatives have created settings that encourage eating *with* the Other. In LoK, guests become family, and the power relations between eater and chef are negotiated through the norms of hospitality, gender, and domesticity. In ÜDTR, the space is designed to accommodate multiple users and identities. This seemingly neutral minimalist mid-century design also reflects the class habitus of cosmopolitan-hipster Germans and internationals in Berlin. The space is successful in creating a neutral backdrop for a variety of performances; however, depending on a diversity of factors – the actors, the arrangement of tables, the presence of alcohol, the time of day, and the mode of exchange – practices of eating *with* the Other can also slip into eating *the* Other.

### *Performances*

The stages we have sketched earlier support and constrain a variety of culinary and social performances. These performances also change the setting and give each kitchen space a distinct vibe that can shift depending on the actors involved, the time of day, the ingredients, visceral reactions to tastes and smells, the presence of alcohol, and background sounds like music and conversation. As several scholars have noted culinary encounters across difference are often carefully staged and

scripted events, designed for the pleasure and comfort of a presumed white viewer/eater (Ray, 2017; Alkon & Grosglik, 2021). In this section I seek to unpack this performance to understand the extent to which participants are able to navigate the power asymmetries of this transaction, and the tension between eating *with* the Other and eating *the* Other. I examine the creation of the performance itself, the roles different actors play in this performance, and the dramas of failed performances, discomfort, and breaking character.

LoK chefs receive training from one another and take the initiative in creating warm, welcoming environments and telling "their story." This is accomplished through individual and peer coaching, and attending LoK workshops in other women's homes to learn from others and become comfortable talking with strangers. The personal story of each chef is co-created with an anthropologist, who conducts interviews on behalf of LoK to create the booklet of recipes each participant receives. The chef and anthropologist curate each story and decide what to share. Of course, chefs can at any time go off script and share other details of their personal lives.

Creating this script and having the ability to fall back on it during culinary performances gives LoK chefs a certain amount of structure and confidence in telling their story, and protects them from unwanted questions. Being at home also allows participants to be themselves, or at least to perform those aspects of themselves that are most comfortable in this setting. In this way they have a lot of agency, but also training and support in creating performances that promote respectful culinary encounters or eating *with* the Other. The home and intimate family setting generates instant familiarity, reducing the presumed distance between self and Other that is evident in practices of exoticism.

> You meet people, you sit down with people around a table, like family and you know you turn friend, many of people they call me, they ask me or like you know we keep in touch with some people, so this is very, it's very different.
>
> (chef, League of Kitchens)

However, the familial atmosphere can also make it challenging for chefs to protect their personal boundaries – especially when being a gracious host is an important part of their personality.

> I can say, "Okay class is done", and people they enjoying, they sit always like about one hour after, an hour and a half and sometimes two hours. But now I'm like more experienced, I'm little bit more professional what I am doing. I start as woman who hosts now, I feel myself, I still am at home, you know, but as chef I'm more, you know I can deal with people.
>
> (chef, League of Kitchens)

Some guests may need a lot of attention, ignore polite signals that the workshop has ended and it's time to go, or bombard the chef with correspondence after the course. Chefs and staff exchange support and tips in confronting these kinds of challenges.

ÜDTR chefs also receive training to host workshops, from one another and the organisation. Part of the training is cooking at free community events like "50 Plates of . . .," to become practiced at interacting with a lot of different people and cooking in a more public and chaotic environment.

> You need to figure out if someone is actually able to give a cooking class and to entertain fourteen people and . . . It can be very intense. And they give a little presentation. You have to have the character for it. So that's what we try and find out.
>
> (staff, UDTR)

At paid workshop, the chefs give a PowerPoint presentation with pictures and facts about their country of origin.

> We usually have about four hours, and yes, we want to fit in all the courses we're going to cook, and we do want to fit in some talking, and we have a little presentation about Tellerrand, we have a little presentation about the cook and his or her country.
>
> (staff, ÜDTR)

The PowerPoint presentation provides a structure and frame for their narrative. However, it is more an encyclopaedia entry than a life story, and uncomfortable topics (related to war, violence, displacement, and living as a refugee) are understandably left out of the presentation.

> you can see from the people how much they want to talk. Some don't have a problem with it, some talk openly about their flight, what happened to them and so on, others don't feel like it at all and would rather concentrate on the positive things and leave the others out and I think that's where it is it's really important to respect that. Also from the guests.
>
> (staff, ÜDTR)

In the public setting of the Kitchen Hub, chefs are on display and perform their roles as teachers, experts, and chefs – providing knowledge and expertise. It may be more challenging to slip into other roles, and professionalised roles may help to preserve some distance between the chef and the paying students. This distance can get in the way of convivial encounters and developing personal connections and friendships; however, it also protects chefs who do not want to share their life story and deepest traumas with a group of strangers.

> [E]veryone knows that they're so-called refugees and where they come from and maybe how long they've been in Germany. But some people they don't want to talk about the way that they came to Germany. That's perfectly fine. No one has to know. That's a very personal thing.
>
> (staff, ÜDTR)

In some instances, paying guests are dissatisfied with the professional performance; they want more personal details, knowledge, intimacy, and connection. There are also the rare guests who came to see an authentic performance of refugee suffering. Despite the respectful setting and clearly stated mission of respectful exchange, these guests came to consume much more than food, they came to eat the Other.

> [I]f someone comes to a cooking class here and pays €75, it still doesn't mean that they can ask you everything.
>
> (staff, ÜDTR)

> Most people understand that, but there are always people in the group who go against it a bit.
>
> (staff, ÜDTR)

Their hungry questions are disruptive to the performance of culinary conviviality as "happy togetherness" and they can trigger a number of trauma responses, like shutting down or crying. I observed this response during a workshop where a white German woman, couldn't seem to stop herself from asking questions that were clearly upsetting to the chef. She only backed off after the chef began to cry. This incident led staff to reflect on what kind of support they can provide chefs, so that they don't feel alone, on exhibition, and can feel safe saying "no" to paying customers.

Although scholars have advocated for the importance of discomfort for challenging hierarchies in intercultural culinary conviviality and been critical of an overemphasis on pleasure, positive feelings, and comfort (Wise & Noble, 2016; Alkon & Grosglik, 2021), it is important to consider how this discomfort is provoked and shared and which bodies already carry more than their fair share of discomfort due to historic and ongoing traumas and injustices. For untraumatised bodies, discomfort (an unfamiliar taste, feeling out of place, etc.) can be a source of visceral learning and transformation (Longhurst et al., 2008) as well as pleasure and adventure (Heldke, 2013), while for others it can be unbearable. Critical scholars are right to critique the fact that intercultural culinary encounters are often designed for the pleasure and comfort of mainstream white bodies. However, in a convivial culinary setting comfort and discomfort are also relational, emotions become contagions traveling from body to body and create a distinct vibe that can shift from warm and friendly to cold and unsafe. In a context in which immigrants, refugees, and people of colour carry a great deal of fear and discomfort, their efforts to create "happy togetherness" and hospitality should also be appreciated as strategies for creating personal safety rather than simply reproducing power relations.

Convivial intercultural culinary encounters like "50 Plates of . . ." at ÜDTR are spaces of desire, the desire for new tastes, experiences, and friendships. But existing research on such encounters continues to centre on the desires of white mainstream culture to have "contact with the Other even as one wishes boundaries to remain intact" (hooks, 1992, p. 372). The desires of the Other are often left unexamined. Yet, these desires, which are also relational and contagious, have

the potential to break down the boundaries of white mainstream culture. According to the director at the time, one of the great hopes of community events at ÜDTR is to help locals and refugees create "real friendships" and "deep personal connections" that can be mutually beneficial and can help refugees grow their personal support network.

> But such a big, big part is to have social contacts and to make new friends and to meet people who you can become like real friends with.
>
> That's sort of what we do with all our projects – to form some lasting, sustainable friendships and get people integrated properly. And it might be more important to, you know, take your mate out to a concert or go to the movies or, you know, just hang out . . . makes other stuff more, let's say, bearable.
>
> (staff, ÜDTR)

However, the hopes and desires that are mobilised at community events are actually quite challenging to satisfy in convivial encounters. One late afternoon, while preparing Syrian "pizza" together we ran out of flour. All the local shops were closed, so one of the participants volunteered to take the bus with me to buy flour at the train station shop. Leaving the buzz and hum of the Kitchen Hub, was a bit of a relief, and the cold air was refreshing. Waiting for the bus, smoking a cigarette, and standing together on the bus opened up a different setting – for performing the mundane and every day. The vibe changed from frenetic to boring, and suddenly I was the one being asked questions about my "exotic" life. My cooking partner revealed that this bus ride was actually the first time he had spent time with someone who wasn't a refugee outside of the Kitchen Hub.

Attending community events over several months, he had plenty of "encounters" with white German women, who desired contact with refugees while keeping their personal boundaries intact. But real friendship remained out of reach. Intersecting forms of social difference shape the performance and interpretation of desire at these events. The majority of the "locals" who attend these events are white, female, and German. The refugees who attend these events are almost exclusively male and Arabic. Cultural differences in gender norms and language barriers send confusing signals – and make the rules of conviviality hard to decipher. White German women wanting to create a warm and pleasant atmosphere slip into a familiar performance of flirting, laughing, and physical contact. This is confusing for the refugee men, who are performing the role of good men – and are afraid of disrespecting women or violating a cultural taboo. On the other hand, when refugee men express their desires for real friendship, this is interpreted as flirting, asking for a date, and overstepping a boundary. The normatively positive atmosphere of "happy togetherness" allows participants to avoid the "heaviness" and "negativity" of the refugee crisis, and people whose lives are in crisis. Fear of these troubles is an additional barrier to forming real friendships. Participating in ÜDTR events allows locals to "feel good" and "do good" without taking on any of

the social, material, or emotional burdens of connecting with someone in crisis. The delicate balance is captured by one interviewee:

> [A]nd just to take away the heaviness a bit from this whole refugee issue. There is always negativity and sadness that is being communicated in the media. [here] It's recognizing that interesting people have come here and they also have a lot to give and we can show each other things and then cooking is just really accessible.
>
> (staff, ÜDTR)

Cooking and eating together are moments of bodily vulnerability and boundary crossing that demand implicit trust and openness in ingesting and digesting "foreign" foods, as well as the beliefs, values, and emotions attached to these foods (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2013). At LoK and ÜDTR, cooking and eating together do not simply break down boundaries and bring strangers together in "happy togetherness." Achieving understanding, connection, and friendship demands much more than good food, conviviality, commensality, and encounter. It requires the appropriate dosage of intimacy, warmth, and professionalism – for chefs and participants to safely navigate the dynamics of desire and discomfort, and the power asymmetries of this transaction. Moreover, the extent to which such practices facilitate eating *with* the Other and support personal and societal transformation, or simply reinforce existing power inequalities by eating *the* Other is still open for debate. Investigating setting and performance at LoK and ÜDTR, it became clear that there are many more factors at play that influence the overall vibe and experience of pleasure, desire, or discomfort.

## Discussion: eating *the* Other or eating *with* the Other?

Whether intercultural culinary encounters are experienced as eating *with* or *of* the Other depends on the extent to which reciprocity is possible. Reciprocity is also essential to the pleasure of conviviality and commensality, where hosts and guests can share food, knowledge, and experiences – giving and receiving freely and generously. Existing power inequalities and market transactions can tip the balance of these exchanges. For example, as hooks (1992) points out – the commodification of otherness is a key element in eating the other, and erasing their difference via "consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization" (1992, p. 373) by which "cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate – that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten" (1992, p. 380).

Eating *the* Other is more likely to take place at paid cooking workshops. In the Kitchen Hub, the commodification of Otherness is more visible. Guests have paid a workshop fee and behave as consumers, who have paid for an experience, a delicious meal, and new knowledge about a cuisine, a person, and their culture. At

paid cooking workshops in private homes, the commodification of Otherness is less visible. The commodification of culture is softened by the familial and domestic setting, and by the feeling that guests are just helping a nice auntie prepare a family meal. In addition, there are many other non-monetary exchanges that take place in the home kitchen – including the exchange of love.

> It's a very beautiful thing to do. And I feel very, very proud of what we do. And I love when I have my students and they come home and they give me all their love. Like I get it, I absorb their love. And I love when they enjoy my food. And it's not my food, it's like, we all put our energy, our love into it and I always tell them, the number one ingredient is making your food with love. Because if you don't make it like that it's not going to taste, love tastes so.
>
> (chef, LoK)

In addition, guests and hosts exchange knowledge, tips, and stories. Otherness is still on offer, but the intimacy of the encounter breaks down the voyeuristic distance that is necessary for exoticising and objectifying a person. And importantly, hosts and guests are equally interested in one another – leaving the hope of real friendship open. All of the chefs I interviewed reported making friends and growing their social and professional network through their cooking workshops. However, one important difference is that immigrant chefs in New York who are successful at making "real friends" have also had the time to establish themselves, stay with or reunite with their families, and build more settled and secure lives compared to newly arrived refugees in Berlin, who are often alone, navigating crisis, and living in shelters and unstable housing.

At ÜDTR eating *with* the Other happens most readily in free community events like "50 Plates of . . .," where locals and refugees all have something to offer – and no one is put on display to serve as culinary ambassador for their country and cuisine. This potluck setting for cooking and eating facilitates reciprocal exchanges, encounters, and the mixing of tastes, ingredients, and cultures. However, eating *with* the Other does not guarantee transformative intercultural encounters, or the possibility of "real friendship." Existing social boundaries may very well remain intact, even as strangers leave the event with greater appreciation for the food and knowledge of others. While the events are effective in staging culinary conviviality as "happy togetherness" – this vibe also smooths over the complex emotions that participants carry with them. These emotions are absorbed by the food on our plates, as sources of desire, pleasure, memory, and connection. They can be tasted, carried home in our bodies, and digested, but it would be against the social rules of "happy togetherness" for these emotions to fall off our plates. That would be sloppy eating and run the risk of creating discomfort and "trouble" for white bodies.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to explore the conditions under which convivial intercultural encounters emerge, and the extent to which such encounters

contribute to the hopes of intercultural friendships and connections that can buffer the troubles of racism and xenophobia. This led me to unpack what is happening in these encounters, the setting of the stage, the possible performances and scripts, and the experiences of desire and discomfort that may result. This has revealed a number of troubles in culinary conviviality, including: the risk of eating *the* Other, provoking discomfort in traumatised bodies, and accommodating the conflicting desires of guests for both adventure, exploration, safety, and familiarity. Returning to hooks' (1992) theorisation of eating the Other as well as sociological theorisations of commensality and conviviality, I have highlighted how commodified transactions and reciprocal sharing shape these experiences and reinforce or challenge particular performances. My approach of centring the emotional experience of desire and discomfort, in both eating *the* Other and eating *with* the Other, is useful for a critical-reparative reading of community food initiatives. Following feelings in the staging and performance of culinary conviviality allows for a more nuanced analysis of the ways in which community food initiatives contain both hopes and troubles. Moreover, it offers a more relational account of the ways in which hope and trouble travel from person to person and coalesce into collective performances and vibes that support or hinder eating *with* the Other, and broader aims of personal and societal transformation through food and eating.

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