IS THE KITCHEN THE NEW VENUE OF FOREIGN POLICY?

IDEAS ON FOOD AS A TOOL FOR DIPLOMACY, BUILDING PEACE AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

A REPORT OF THE CONFLICT CUISINE® PROJECT, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY, SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL SERVICE
CONFLICT CUISINE

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Conflicted Cuisine examines the nexus of food and war. Included in this study is the practice of culinary diplomacy and gastrodiplomacy by governments and citizens of countries that have experienced war or conflict. In diplomatic terms, Conflict Cuisine and the use of food to persuade and educate is a form of soft power.

There are two forms of Conflict Cuisine. The first is food in zones of conflict – a phenomenon that encompasses access to food, food security, and the impact fighting in the field has on existing food supply and provisioning of goods to market. Food is often studied in the context of humanitarian aid and post-conflict development. At present, over 50 percent of all foreign assistance given by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) goes to humanitarian purposes and development in conflict or post-conflict countries. Yet even today we do not fully understand what levels or aspects of food insecurity are most likely to directly contribute to or cause conflict. It is an area where there is little interdisciplinary academic research – especially as it relates to political governance issues that are the basis for many conflicts.

The second form of Conflict Cuisine is the food of diaspora populations that transfer their national foodways to new countries: an extension of their culture. Immigrants use their food culture as a means of creating a new life in their adopted country – both as a means of remembering their homeland and to learn a living. Immigrants also serve as culinary diplomats. Through their cooking as a means of remembering their homeland and to earn a living, as a means of creating a new life in their adopted country – both an extension of their culture. Immigrants use their food culture to the diversity of our own foodways.

Today we live in a world where the presence of fragile states creates the backdrop for a discussion of food, war, and conflict. Conflict is multidimensional as is the concept of food security. Even though there has been a dramatic reduction of global poverty over the last 60 years, we are now living in a period with repeated cycles of political and security violence. There are still more than 15 billion people who live in conflict-affected, post-conflict, or fragile states. And today, there are over 60 million refugees who have wandered the globe, the result of ongoing turmoil in many parts of the world.

There is growing research confirming the connection between the changing climate and its impact on food supply that affects many of the conflicts affecting many parts of sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. Increasingly; water is entering as an issue, with the potential to be as precious as oil – and an equally contentious commodity.

Conflict Cuisines will remain a feature of the American culinary and diplomatic arenas for decades to come. Food remains one of the strongest links that diaspora have with their native lands – the taste and flavors that remain indelible even when transferred to another country. We have not seen the end of tragic conflicts. But the prospect of more individuals coming to new lands brings with them a culinary heritage that is novel and untested remains the one silver lining in an otherwise tragic set of events. As immigrants use their food to integrate themselves in their new homes, we all become the beneficiaries of this cultural transition.

INTRODUCTION

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March 2016

Three years ago I embarked on a journey to connect the work I had done on post-conflict reconstruction with the role that food played in driving conflict, but also a tool that helped to build peace. Coming around a table and sharing the food of another culture could demonstrate the humanizing effect that breaking bread has on dispelling stereotypes or disinformation about different cultures.

The spark that ignited what eventually became a course entitled Conflict Cuisine: War and Peace Around the Dining Table, was a luncheon at the State Department where bloggers had been invited to learn about various outreach programs on public diplomacy that had been initiated by then Secretary of State Clinton. One program they highlighted was culinary diplomacy and the creation of an American Chefs Corps, an inspired dimension of Smart Power.

As luck would have it I was seated across from a young man, the creator of the term gastrodiplomacy, Paul Rockower, who led me to the conclusion that the time was ripe to connect foods of the Washington diaspora with the formal study of war and peace. I also met Professor Craig Hayden, an expert in cultural diplomacy, who invited me to another event at American University that actually discussed the broader dimensions of food in diplomacy, from nation branding to export strategies to culinary diplomatic engagement. And it was also my good fortune to meet one of the speakers, another rising star in study of culinary diplomacy, Sam Chapple Sokol, who had written an excellent study on this topic. Within weeks the idea of teaching students about conflict through the kitchens and chefs of the diaspora came together. When I proposed the idea to American University’s School of International Service, they were willing to take the risk of indulging me in this proposal, scheduling a capstone course in the spring of 2013. I was even luckier to have had Chapple Sokol as my first research assistant, and Paul Rockower as an adviser.

The course featured classroom study about the way conflicts, post-conflict reconstruction, and food security were components of the study of conflict cuisines. But the course also had the unique quality of allowing students to get out and meet diaspora chefs, taste their food, and share a meal. After all, wasn’t this city the home of so many immigrants who had fled the fighting in the places that conflict raged? From the first generation of Vietnamese immigrants, to the Afghan refugees of 1979, to the asylum seekers from Ethiopia’s horrific civil wars to thousands of immigrants from Central America’s conflicts it was clear that their presence was evident by the rise in ethnic eateries that dotted the streets of the Washington metropolitan area.

This spring marks the third time we have offered the course. Students continue to be surprised about the connection of food and international relations and development. They enjoy the ability to learn about fragile states, to explore the conflicts that are so much a part of the news cycle, but also find the ability to talk to people who have left these conflict states in the setting of a dining room to be as instructive in learning how the everyday act of eating can also be a teaching moment. They have even been able to sample the ultimate food of war – MREs – meals ready to eat – that our soldiers carry into battle and HDR’s humanitarian daily rations – the sustenance of refugees fleeing conflict.

The Kitchen as the New Venue of Foreign Policy is a report about a conference we hosted on April 21, 2015 that tried to draw together the themes of the work on conflict cuisine, to offer those who attended a taste of the foods of conflict cultures, and to use the time to discuss with chefs, diplomats and food security experts the various threads of ideas and concepts that make teaching about food, war and the capacity for food to build peace to reflect a compelling story about the world in the 21st century.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Many people have made the Kitchen as the New Venue of Foreign Policy conference and report possible.

I would like to offer special thanks to Karis McGill and Leighton Clark, my two graduate research assistants, who have made this event a reality. Their tireless work and support is evidenced in this report.

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Caterer Carlos Cesario, chef and visionary, has also made it possible as the impresario of eating, getting our conflict cuisines ready for lunch.

Special thanks are due to the American University branch of Spoon University. http://american.spoonuniversity.com/ and in particular Mai Someya, its Director of Marketing and Business Development who created the art work for the conference poster and program, but also provided us with wonderful food to share with participants.

My thanks goes out to the School of International Service faculty and especially to former Dean Louis W. Goodman, Ambassador Anthony Quainton, Professor Gary Weaver, Professor Nanette Levinson, Professor Rose Shinks, Professor Lee Schenker and Dean James Goldgeier for their ongoing support of this project.

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Finally, I am grateful to the generous gift of the Mann-Paller Foundation that allowed us to host the conference, develop the report, and to have confidence in the concept of conflict cuisines.

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WHY CONFLICT CUISINE? WHY NOW?

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My earliest memories of conflict cuisine are the stories my mother told me. Sitting in our kitchen in New York, I heard how many, many women came to the United States to escape the Nazis. Those were stories of horror and a world gone wrong, but they were also stories of hope of sacrifice of perseverance of survival. In part what kept these women going was their desire to keep alive the memory of their homelands through their foods. Meals around which their families gathered to celebrate the great moments and to seek solace in dark times. The chocolate cakes of Hungary. The butter cookies of Austria. The desserts of Vienna. Warmth. Joy. Love. My mother, a wonderful cook and writer, was also an "American." She became the translator of recipes for this generation of women. While all our family's friends told harrowing stories of their journey to America they also carried their culinary baggage. Special recipes passed from generation to generation. All those secrets -- how to knead the dough, how to braise a brisket, what gave those butter cookies that texture and taste. All these things, and in these things that they were able to share of their personal histories embodied in their recipes -- my mother helped them memorialize all of this in English. Joan Didion wrote a famous line, "we tell ourselves stories in order to live." These recipes were their stories.

Little did I realize that I was actually learning about the principles of Conflict Cuisine. And so my curiosity about the relationship between war and food began.

We know that food's relationship to conflict is complex and multidimensional. But it is only recently that the world of food -- agricultural sciences, war, and diplomacy in providing humanitarian aid and building peace -- have all become a part of a larger inquiry into the nexus of food and war.

There is no doubt about the centrality of hunger and war. But we have learned from recent times that rebuilding states after the fighting has stopped stimulates innovation, trade, and resilience by survivors who rebuild their farms, their communities and their lives. Food connects people who fled their homelands. It enriches our memories. The taste of home, the memory of a dinner with a loved one, the ingredients of a national dish that inspire our souls, that bond us to history, that help us to define ourselves.

This conference will reflect on three different ways in which cuisine affects conflict and also how it becomes a tool of foreign policy as a form of soft power. Ironically, it is the hard power of states and rebel groups that leads to this conversation about conflict cuisine. But today we set out on a journey to look at food through the lens of diplomacy: conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and national identity. Sure, there are other dimensions of food that we could address and are equally important -- food security and sustainability, humanitarian assistance, agricultural production including genetically modified vegetables nutrition, food waste, and more. But with limited time I thought we could start with those aspects of food to what the appetite to other themes.

The course “Conflict Cuisines: War and Peace Around the Dinner Table” looks at the diasporas that emerged in the Washington, D.C. area not only to make new lives but to make new friends through their kitchens. Immigrants who have been displaced by the conflicts of the Cold War to those who have arrived more recently, fleeing Syria -- all have in common the desire to succeed in a new country through the use of their respective cuisines to feed their own compatriots, but also those of us who live here, to build and sustain a community that sustains and grows all it embraces.

Food is a tool of economic resilience. It may be hard to learn English immediately, but it is possible to cook, to open a restaurant, and to help support one's family. My goal when I first conceived of this project was to have students learn about wars past and ongoing conflicts today to seek out both the histories of these events, but also to put these conflicts into a more tangible, more relevant context by meeting restaurateurs, interviewing immigrant chefs, and studying entrepreneurs, and tasting their cuisines. I also wanted to see whether this type of course could become a template for use by other schools nationwide. Better way to build understanding, in a community than by meeting those who have newly arrived and begun sharing their culture -- and their stories -- through the kitchen.

We start this program with a conversation about culinary diplomacy. One of the oldest forms of foreign policy is the use of food to bond, to persuade, to win hearts and minds, and to convince. Even though the French claim to be the inventors of this type of diplomacy (Last December French Minister Laurent Fabius declared that the French invented culinary diplomacy, causing much discussion in the culinary diplomatic world). This practice of hosting dinners with national leaders -- the State Dinners at the White House -- for political ends has deep roots, from biblical times, to the Roman Empire, to Renaissance Italy and beyond.

And in the United States culinary diplomacy has also gained greater notoriety. In 2012 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton inaugurated the American Chef Corps to demonstrate our nation's culinary prowess and showcase our best chefs -- so many who themselves were immigrants -- to other nations. A more recent area of this type of diplomacy is that of the international community. Food has been used to think of as people-to-people eating -- food trucks, market stands, and more. The rise of food blogs, the TV chefs who travel the world to become the new interviewers with communities around a dining table -- all attest to the growing awareness of the role food can play in letting down one's guard and speaking truth to power. Some may even conclude that chefs have become some of the most trusted individuals. If you are willing to eat what has been cooked by someone who you have never met, you are demonstrating a high degree of trust and legitimacy in that chef by eating that food.

If diplomacy fails, what role will food play in conflict? That is the subject of our second panel. Our talented speakers will provide us with illuminating stories on ways in which food has been used to build peace, to win hearts and minds, and to build economic resilience with immigrants. The flip side of this issue: whether food drives conflict, will also be explored as we know that climate change, environmental degradation, and warfare all threaten agriculture and the access to food, and thus impact lives. Refugees from Syria now comprise a third of that country's population, creating one of the greatest humanitarian feeding problems. This The United Nations World Food Program has ever faced. Yet food can also be seen as a form of resilience -- just watch videos of Syrian women in camps preparing recipes from the food they get from vouchers provided by aid agencies. Adaptability and innovation are all part of the discussion about food, conflict and the connection of both.

Conflict cuisines have been a feature of Washington’s restaurant scene for decades. I can recall how the old Washington refrain -- telling where we were at war by what new restaurants open -- was evident with each new ethnic cuisine that emerged in our city. Today the changes in our immigration policies have constrained this part of our culinary scene. Tim Carman of the Washington Post, who so ably documented the “cheap eats” of our city, has also become the unofficial culinary ambassador of ethnic food. He will be interviewing some local chefs -- not the big names, but people who cook and teach others -- about how they view these international foods in the midst of high-end Washington restaurants. In his stories, he recounts these chefs emerging from their histories of conflict and strife in their homelands to live out the American dream.

Nations have recently discovered that food can be the perfect hook to elevate their standing in a world of competing economic interests. Middle powers like Peru and Mexico have taken advantage of their great cuisines and their chefs to promote their food to the pinnacle of their national brand. Today Peru is the number one culinary destination according to Travel and Leisure magazine. And, Peru shows too, the vast migration worldwide, its cuisine reflecting Asian and African influences. Thanks to the work of UNESCO, which deems certain cuisines intangible world heritage designations, we see how food becomes something that we must not only eat to survive, but also consume to celebrate the best of a culture. So why hasn’t the United States been a party to this important treaty?

Food is also a powerful tool of chef’s who want to use their skills to help people in need. The work of programs like World Central Kitchen underscores the way the modern chefs like José Andrés and his team can give food and comfort in places like Haiti. They can also become the face of education about food when chefs combine their skills to help eliminate food waste or manage food deserts. Culinary tourism, nation branding, and food as a way to provide relief are all considered in this last panel.

Finally a conference on food would not be complete unless we talked about food memories. What do people remember about their past? The kitchen Sisters have been regaling us for years with their stories of hidden kitchens. We end this meeting with a conversation with sister Nikki Silva about what she has learned from the conversations we have held today as a way to expand our understanding of three subjects that were often treated in depth separately but not considered together: food, war and diplomacy.

I hope you enjoy this day as much as I enjoyed putting this program together.

Thank you.

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LIFE AROUND THE TABLE: CUISINE AS A POINT OF ENTRY FOR DISCUSSIONS ABOUT GLOBAL ISSUES

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When my daughter at 2-years-old sat in her highchair grabbing the last bits of my homemade macaroni and meatballs and joyfully exclaimed, “I love food!” my then 87-year-old Italian immigrant father was witness to this delicious moment and put his hands together in prayerful thanksgiving to the Lord as if to say, “My work here is done!”

As a child and grandchild of immigrants who came to the US and opened a small Italian grocery store and a neighborhood Neapolitan pizzeria, I understand the concept of a food culture – or gastro diplomacy as it is called now – the use of food as symbol of national identity as well as a tool to assimilate into an adopted country.

We were part of a large ethnic diaspora in Connecticut, many of whom left their homeland for reasons of poverty – and I can identify with that aspect of creating a food culture that Johanna Mendelson Forman teaches here at American University in the Conflict Cuisine course.

I also had the memory of moving here to Washington in 1981. I could not find decent Italian food but I quickly became acquainted with exotic restaurants that featured the cuisine of other cultures and immigrants to this area – restaurants such as Vietnam in Georgetown, or Mama Ayesh’s Middle Eastern restaurant in Cleveland Park; the Red Sea Ethiopian restaurant in Adams Morgan, or El Tamarindo and also Omega – the El Salvadorian and Cuban restaurants in Adams Morgan.

All of them are countries and populations that had seen their share of conflict and resulting migration. These were the culinary diplomats who used action-forcing events in their countries to create traditions that are now part of our culinary destiny.

Much later, while working at the State Department and the White House, I saw first hand the use of food as a tool of diplomacy – quite literally a delicious use of soft power through the art of culinary diplomacy.

For example, in the planning of State Dinners for foreign heads of state we are eager to showcase our food culture and cuisine while also giving a nod to the cuisine culture of our foreign guest by utilizing a guest chef, or incorporating a symbol of our guest’s national identity in the menu.

But, also during those years I saw the nexus between food and disease and food and conflict. In my travels to nearly 70 countries including many post-conflict nations in the Middle East, Central America, Africa and South Central Asia I saw first hand how the ravages of war – and the resulting food insecurity -- are a great threat to sustainable development.

Even in the poorest countries - hardest hit by the most challenging circumstances - our foreign hosts were always eager to share their culture through their food and offer whatever they have on their table as a tool of communication about their way of life.

I can distinctly remember tasting the juice of pomegranates in Afghanistan, or of cassava in Liberia. And I definitely have vivid recollections of being offered warm, fermented goat’s milk when sitting in a yurt in 18-degree weather in Ulanbantur, Mongolia. That drink might have a hard time finding a place on a menu here at home --- and certainly was far less appealing to me than the Pisco sours I was offered in Peru!

But they all had the same effect. They told a story about how food is essential to understanding how people relate to each other. That’s why this discussion is so exciting. The experts participating in this discussion are sharing their knowledge on this important topic of food and what we can learn about history, culture -- and conflict -- by examining life around the table.
CULINARY DIPLOMACY, GASTRODIPLOMACY, AND CONFLICT CUISINE: DEFINING THE FIELD

In the United States, culture is popularly defined by the public parameters of art, music, literature, cinema, theater, and food. Those are the most visible signs of a culture. But real culture resides internally: it is the beliefs and worldviews that are instilled by family and community and passed down from generation to generation.

The visible differences are what most often engage us but cultural clashes often occur with the internal differences at the value level. "You wake up one morning and it occurs to you, they're not playing cards with the same deck you use back home. They don't think the way you do; they don't share your worldviews, your values. You're disoriented, you're confused, but that's when you're really learning culture," said Dr. Gary Weaver. It is through questioning "why" and placing one's self in another's psychological and cultural shoes that understanding begins about one's self and one's culture. Cultural clashes are disorienting but it also brings understanding.

The best way to understand one's culture is to leave it. "By understanding the value or motive behind one behavior, we now open the door to explaining many behaviors," said Sonenshine. The best way to understand one's culture is to leave it. "By understanding the value or motive behind one behavior, we now open the door to explaining many behaviors," said Sonenshine. The best way to understand one's culture is to leave it. "By understanding the value or motive behind one behavior, we now open the door to explaining many behaviors," said Sonenshine.

"The role of gastrodiplomacy is the nexus of food and foreign policy and how countries communicate their culture through food. It is the use of restaurants as foreign cultural outposts. Gastrodiplomacy is how you communicate your culture through your food, how you reach out to a foreign audience and share your culture, history and heritage through your food. It is the idea that the flag can follow the fork."

DEFINING THE FIELD

Gastrodiplomacy is edible nation branding. For many years it was middle powers, such as Thailand, Taiwan, Peru or South Korea that would practice gastrodiplomacy to create a larger nation brand for themselves and increase understanding for their culture. Recently, larger powers like the US and France practice gastrodiplomacy as well, but in a very different fashion. We see nuance and a focus on regional varieties and distinctions between cuisines.

The beauty of gastrodiplomacy is that it is a medium that inspires many people and empowers diaspora communities to share their traditions and cultures.

DEFINING CULINARY DIPLOMACY

Sam Chappelle-Sokol, a culinary diplomacy blogger, is a research consultant and culinary diplomat. He participated in the discussion by video to provide a definition of the expanding field of culinary diplomacy.

Chappelle-Sokol presented: "culinary diplomacy is the use of food or a cuisine as a tool to create a cross-cultural understanding in the hopes of improving interactions and cooperation. Hillary Clinton said this is the oldest form of diplomacy."

At the official diplomatic level there is, of course, the ceremony of state dinners, but there are also interpersonal connections such as official state chefs exchanging recipes or engaging with traditionally secluded communities like the Amish. At the next level of public diplomacy, we see countries actively promoting their national cuisine as Thailand did with their government-funded initiative, Global Thai. The United States is also utilizing cuisine through their American Chef Corps, which sends American chefs to foreign countries to cook and interact with the local population. The 2015 World Expo in Milan, Italy is focusing entirely on food and will offer an exciting opportunity for countries to brand themselves with their food.

Culinary diplomacy means to further diplomatic protocol through cuisine and it can take place at the citizen level. By eating at a diaspora restaurant, and engaging with the owners or the community that frequents it, we can employ a deeper level of understanding. World leaders can share meals; but it won't create lasting peace. That has to happen at the citizen level. But it is becoming clear that using food as a means of engagement can produce important connections between nations and people.

FOOD AS A FORM OF ENGAGEMENT

With a background in both academia and diplomacy, Tara Sonenshine, Professor, George Washington University, and former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy started the discussion by detailing how food is used as a form of engagement.

Sonenshine noted: We all like to eat and we all like to eat all kinds of different foods. Diplomacy is about finding common ground. It is about figuring out where people intersect in the most human of ways so that they might be able to set their differences aside and find some way to get along.

Greeks and Romans would invite their enemies to the table to get to know them. They would "break the ice." In modern times, Hillary Clinton brought “smart power” to the table. It was meant to include...the notion of being smart about how you use power. Asking what could we have in our toolbox of diplomacy that may help our overseas audiences connect to us? Using food in a formal way in the field of public diplomacy. Deploying chefs and bringing in new chefs to the US, drawing on the power of the people who prepare food as a way of reaching out across the table.

Food is both fun and serious. It comes down to those who can eat and those who cannot eat. It is about war/peace: too much (obesity)/too little (malnourishment). We need to be cognizant that food can be used as a weapon and as a war mechanism, but it is also a bridge builder. It is emotional, it triggers memory, it explores history, and it defines you who are.

SUSTAINABILITY AND FOOD SECURITY

With nearly 20 years of public and private sector experience in the science of health, nutrition, and food safety, Kimberly Reed, Executive Director, International Food Information Council Foundation brought the voice of the global food, beverage, and agricultural industry to the discussion. She expounded on the importance of environmental sustainability and food security to culinary diplomacy.

Reed detailed: "The Next Generation of Global Food Security: Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life. 144 countries are participating, including the United States. The theme of the Expo is ‘Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life.’ The Next Generation is the phrase that the Expo uses to highlight the importance of addressing food security in the context of climate change and sustainable development. The Expo will bring together experts from around the world to discuss the challenges and opportunities facing the global food system and to explore innovative solutions to these challenges. The Expo will feature a variety of programs and activities, including exhibitions, forums, workshops, and cultural events. The Expo is expected to attract millions of visitors from around the world. It will be held in Milan, Italy, from May 1 to October 31, 2015. As part of the Expo, the United States will participate in a number of events and initiatives, such as the United States Pavilion, which will showcase American agricultural products and highlight the country’s commitment to sustainable food production and distribution. The United States will also host a series of events and programs focused on food security and nutrition, such as the US Pavilion’s “Healthy Diets for All” initiative, which will feature demonstrations and workshops on healthy eating and nutrition. The Expo is expected to be a catalyzing event that will bring together global leaders, experts, and stakeholders to discuss the key issues facing the food system and to advance solutions that can help ensure that everyone has access to adequate, healthy, and sustainable food. The Expo is a unique opportunity for the United States to showcase its leadership in food security and to demonstrate the country’s commitment to addressing the challenges facing the global food system."
which represent 94% of the world’s population. Each country will have a pavilion to showcase their own theme on how they plan to practice sustainability in the future. Biotechnology and food sustainability is important for the future of our planet. Why? In 2050 there will be 9.6 billion people on the planet who will need 70% more food than what we are producing today.

The American pavilion is designed to resemble a grain elevator and the exterior walls will be planted with vertical gardens from which acrobats will periodically harvest produce to serve as part of the meals available for consumption inside. Visitors will be able to experience a traditional American Thanksgiving dinner within the pavilion as well as an assortment of food trucks placed around the city of Milan.

The American pavilion focus is on American Food 2.0: United to Feed the Planet. Why American Food 2.0? Because the United States is intelligently and thoughtfully engaged in food and global food security and we want to be focusing on responsibility, the importance of international relationships, science and technology, nutrition and health, and culinary culture.

During the Q&A segment, audience members were given the opportunity to engage with the panelists on topics not covered in their presentations. Among the key issues raised was the importance of culinary authenticity, food fusion, and gastrodiplomacy and the private sector.

CULINARY AUTHENTICITY AND GASTRODIPLOMACY

The first question asked was how important authenticity of food to a culture when practicing gastrodiplomacy?

Paul Rockower explained: It is important to strike a balance between authenticity and accessibility. It would be difficult to serve spicy Indian food to American consumers who enjoy mild salsa. But there is a lot of room to play with the cuisine, such as fusion foods like Korean Tacos.

Tara Sonenshine pointed out: In this discussion drinks must also be considered, as well as food and the branding that accompanies wine. Cheers and toasts within our social customs are important. Cultural sensitivity around what we eat and drink has a positive and negative side of respecting peoples strongly held views about food and drink. For example the ongoing hummus debate between Arabs, Israelis, and Palestinians over who has the most authentic hummus. That is a healthy debate.

IS CULTURAL HYBRIDITY OF FOOD A FORM OF COLONIZATION OF CULTURE?

Another question introduced the idea of cultural hybridity or the blending of multiple cultures into something different and new and whether this is a form or colonization of culture?

There must be a balance between creating something familiar and being entrepreneurial. International chefs coming in and using local ingredients creates a notion of food experimentation, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Food is an open-minded field that dares to not always be exactly what you were looking for, explained Tara Sonenshine.

Kimberly Reed noted: There is a beauty of using traditional foods, but in this world there is room to explore and experiment.

CAN GASTRODIPLOMACY BE PERCEIVED AS TOO AGGRESSIVE BY THE PRIVATE SECTOR?

An audience member asked when gastrodiplomacy is practiced by the private sector can it be perceived as too aggressive? Is there a tightrope to be walked between respecting a culture that already exists and bringing the American experience abroad?

Paul Rockower explained: Gastrodiplomacy is a little bit different from the private sector. Starbucks is not an actor in gastrodiplomacy because they are a private company expanding to new territories whereas gastrodiplomacy is a government initiative to educate foreign populations on the nuances of a countries food and culture.

WITH FOOD FUSION, WHICH CULTURE CAN LAY CLAIM TO THE NEW CREATION?

As fusion cooking has become an increasingly utilized element of the culinary landscape, one audience member asked, for creations that are a mixture of different cultures, which gets to lay claim to the new creation? For example, who owns Korean Tacos?

Paul Rockower declared: Both cultures should take ownership and recognize what stems from each culture because these mixtures and new creations are more interesting as a marriage between cultures.

DOES FOOD BUILD PEACE OR DRIVE CONFLICT?

Yael Luttwak
President & CEO of Slimpeace, and Filmmaker
Christine Fair
Associate Professor, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, and Author of Cooking in the Axis of Evil
Manolia Charlotin
Director, Feet in Two Worlds Program, The New School
Roger-Mark De Souza
Director of Population, Environmental Security, and Resilience, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
Moderator
Louis Goodman, Dean Emeritus, School of International Service, American University

DOES FOOD BUILD PEACE OR DRIVE CONFLICT?
Food cannot be separated from the human experience. Access to food and water are essential to human survival. When food is scarce it can become a source of conflict. Withholding of food has also become a tactic of war, with starvation of enemies a means of repression. Sharing food has also been a way that people can communicate by sitting around a table and breaking bread. Food has become a tool for driving both peace and conflict, depending on how it is utilized. Food can be a powerful tool for educating and humanizing conflicts. The foods we eat in this country and around the world are reflections of history and culture food. The globalization of the palate has also served as a platform for understanding discord over larger political issues. Food brings a cultural vibrancy to a community by serving as a means of integration of new immigrant groups. But we also know that food insecurity even in this age of plenty can be a major force for inducing local conflicts.

"If you want to bring people together and think about what people have in common, how they can come together, or celebrate the kinds of struggles that diaspora peoples go through to build their lives in a new place, food is a wonderful place to do that," said Louis Goodman.

A discussion of food as a place for peace or conflict is essential to understanding the role food plays in building community, economic empowerment, and effective development policies.

THE ROLE OF FOOD IN HUMANIZING ISSUES

The discussion opened with a presentation from Yael Luttwak, Filmmaker and President & CEO of Slimpeace, a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering women to improve their eating habits and adopt a healthy lifestyle through a group support system run by certified facilitators. Showing a clip from her film, A Slim Peace, and offering brief remarks, Luttwak demonstrated how food can be a powerful tool for humanizing issues of conflict and culture even in the most intractable of conflicts.

Luttwak remarked: A Slim Peace is a film about a weight loss group amidst the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the end of the Second Intifada in 2005. Members of this weight loss group were chosen from Israelis, Palestinians, Jews, Christians, Muslims, settlers, and Bedouin women. For several weeks these women came together to discuss their weight loss issues, dieting issues, and nutritional issues. Through the process of a health education program, they were able to meet the other as a human being. The most inspiring result of this process was that eventually the women started to connect with the humanizing aspects, disregarding the toxic political divisions that should have caused the group to splinter. Despite immense political changes, the women continued to meet and form bonds with one another.

After the film was presented at various film festivals, Dame Hilary Blume reached out and urged the creation of more chapters of Slimpeace. At present, there are thirty cohorts, or weight loss groups, in the Middle East and ten in the United States, including a teen cohort in Portland, Maine. These groups use food as a tool to build confidence, to help integrate newcomers to communities, and also through sharing of experiences around eating find common ground for coexistence.

"Food is a very powerful, personal thing. If there are reasons that you want to point out that there is injustice and get people thinking around conflict, you can go with food." –Louis Goodman

Dean Emeritus  
School of International Service  
American University

DECONSTRUCTING THE RELATIONSHIPS AND POLITICS OF FOOD

For Christine Fair, Associate Professor, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, and Author of Cooking in the Axis of Evil, food is a battlefield. Who you eat with and what you eat is defined by your religion, gender and status. She brought to the discussion a look at the politics of food and the power relationships behind cooking.

Fair explained: In South Asia, who you eat with depends largely on who you are and what social group you fall into. Often different religious communities will not dine with each other and different genders will almost never break bread at the same time. Although women are the primary producers of food in these cultures, they are expected to serve the men first and be content with the leftovers. For me, food is not the opportunity for kumbaya, it is the opportunity to express these, often primordial, divisions.

How many of these cuisines reflect imperialism, colonialism, slavery, or other politics of history? It is impossible to separate cuisine from the political background from which it originates. For example, the food that we traditionally think of as Caribbean is largely influenced by the North Atlantic slave trade and the large presence of Chinese restaurants in America is due to the Chinese workers in the railroad industry.

Food is an important part of diaspora culture, as people will lose their language but they will not lose their food.

FOOD AND COMMUNITY

As a multimedia journalist and strategist with experience in print, broadcast, and online publications, as well as a deep understanding of the Haitian-American community, Manolia Charlotin, Director, Feet in Two Worlds Program, The New School brought a unique voice of diaspora communities to the discussion. Charlotin presented a short video produced by Feet in Two World that highlights the resistance and often discrimination that many street vendors in New York – largely women immigrants – are facing and then made remarks on how immigrants build a new life and a new community through food.
ALBUM OF THE DIASPORA CHEFS IN THE NATION’S CAPITOL LUNCHEON

For anyone who has ever read a cookbook, reading and talking about food yields important insights, but actually tasting food brings a new level of understanding. To complement the conference’s lively discussions, the Diaspora Chefs produced a luncheon of their native cuisines. Guests at the conference tasted the cuisines of Vietnam, Thailand, Ethiopia, Lebanon, and El Salvador. The luncheon allowed attendees to interact with the chefs and experience for themselves how food drives connections and conversations.
ALBUM OF THE DIASPORA CHEFS IN THE NATION’S CAPITOL LUNCHEON

TASTING CONFLICT CUISINES: A CONVERSATION WITH DIASPORA CHEFS

Benjamin Velasquez
Chef, Sonia Gutierrez Center, Carlos Rosario Charter School

Mariano Ramos
Chef, Sonia Gutierrez Center, Carlos Rosario Charter School

Carlos Cesario
Chef & Owner, Q Caterers

Sileshi Alifom
Owner, DAS Ethiopian Restaurant

Moderator
Tim Carman, Washington Post Food Writer
TASTING CONFLICT CUISINES: A CONVERSATION WITH DIASPORA CHEFS

Chefs are the vital center of the discussion on the kitchen as the new venue for foreign policy, yet they are often a hidden voice. Their impact can be tasted in every dish but they are behind the scenes influence – in the kitchen doing the hard work of creating and cooking the food that tells the story of their culture and their experiences.

In a discussion led by Tim Carman, Washington Post Food Writer, who has made a reputation as Washington’s ambassador of ethnic food three diaspora chefs and a restaurateur examine how they use their culinary influence to connect people to their culture and their food.

Tim Carman, Moderator, began the discussion by asking each chef to share what brought them to the United States and what got them into food.

Chef Carlos Cesario, D Caterers: It actually was conflict that brought me to the United States – my family didn’t want me to come. I was an architect in Venezuela. During a semester abroad in Belgium, and traveling around Europe, I became interested in food. Building your own plate is a type of architecture in itself. I had the opportunity to apply for an architectural job but ended up getting one in cooking. I had a very good teacher; she was the assistant to Roland Mesnier, the White House pastry chef. Working in that type of international and American high-end cuisine helped to expand my horizons into other types of cuisine – particularly Mediterranean and Asian – and later to open my own business as a caterer. The catering business is always a learning experience about the mix of different ingredients and countries.

Chef Mariano Ramos, Sonia Gutierrez Center, Carlos Rosario Charter School, Washington, DC: My parents came to the United States from Mexico. They worked as professionals - environmentalists who worked with the World Wildlife Fund and the World Bank managing projects all over the world. My turn to food was an identity question to myself. How I wanted to represent myself and what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I have a degree in computer engineering, but found that it was food that included all of who I am. I switched paths and studied at L’Academie de Cuisine with Roland Mesnier as well. Now I am teaching at Carlos Rosario International public school, helping immigrants to better their jobs and better their lives.

Sileshi Alifom, Owner, DAS Ethiopian: I am an Ethiopian by birth. I came to the United States in 1970 to go to school. Nothing to do with food or beverage. I attended SUNY New Paltz. During that time I was recruited by Marriott. I moved to California to basically work as a caterer, a food person in general. My first job with Marriott was a banquet manager. At that time I really got into the food. Since I first came to America, I’ve worked as a waiter or a dishwasher, or something in the food industry. What I appreciated most was pleasing people, seeing people smiling, and hearing how great the service and food was. I retired after 23 years with Marriott. I briefly went into financial services and then returned to the restaurant business in Washington DC by purchasing a restaurant called Zeeds in Georgetown. I transformed it into an establishment for high-end Ethiopian cuisine. My mindset was to share Ethiopian cuisine with everyone. I believe that restaurants are about wanting to talk with people, to engage with people, and to educate them on food that they’ve never had before.

Chef Benjamin Velasquez, Sonia Gutierrez Center, Carlos Rosario Charter School, Washington, DC: I grew up in El Salvador. I always wanted to be a lawyer and I worked at a courthouse. In a conflict region, being a young person is a crime. Communist guerrillas were hunting young people, and the government was recruiting them by force. My only choice was to flee. We had to migrate illegally. Going north to the United States of America was the best choice. Once here, I was without family, friends, roots, and people spoke another language. To me, the Americans were speaking everything upside down – it didn’t make sense. Once I realized I was on my own and I had to survive – a fundamental immigrant experience – I took a job as a dishwasher. Promoted to assistant prep cook, I worked my way through the positions of line cook, shift supervisor, sous chef, chef, to trainer. That’s how I got into training people in the food service industry. However, due to limited English, I was training people that would eventually become my boss. I attended a culinary school for three years, where I realized that culinary arts and food service is the largest industry in the world. It’s the only industry that never shrinks. When people mention the oldest profession in the world, of course it’s cooking! Where there are people, there is food. I have worked for 29 years at the Carlos Rosario School in Washington DC, where I serve immigrants from all over the world. It doesn’t matter where you go in the city, there is an immigrant working in every hotel and restaurant. Because of this, resident and visitor to DC have the opportunity to experience the richness of different flavor profiles from all over the world.

Tim Carman: It is a mystery how the United States has a reputation of imposing its will on different countries, but so accepting of other cuisines and flavors of other cultures. Why is your native cuisine popular and where it’s at in the United States.

What helped, push it into the mainstream?

Chef Mariano Ramos: Mexican cuisine’s popularity today has a lot of its presence due to the availability of ingredients. Authentic Mexican food stems from the indigenous roots. As this cuisine moved north and entered the American diet, it has changed a lot. Now people are now searching for authentic Mexican food, and the techniques and ingredients that make up this authenticity. So a lot has changed in our approach to eating and creating Mexican cuisine in the United States.

Sileshi Alifom: The most important parts of a restaurant are the flavor, cooking style, and smell of the cuisine. The menu of my restaurant, DAS, does not have prices outside the door. I want people to come inside to look for the price, so they get to smell and experience. The best customer is the person who has never been to an Ethiopian restaurant before, because she doesn’t know what she will be getting to eat. Because there is no real ‘recipe’ per se, the experience is all about the hand of the chef who is making the food. The most unique aspect of this experience is that Ethiopians eat with their hands; and for some people it is very difficult. The hand is the integral part of the enjoyment. I try to personally talk to people to make sure they really understand what they are eating and how it’s made.

Chef Benjamin Velasquez: I love American customers. It doesn’t matter what you give them, they never complain, they never give it back, and they pay the bill with tip. People who are familiar with the food expect authenticity, and expect that you deliver on quality. Until the late 1990’s, Salvadorian restaurants had to rely on other major cuisines to create fusion. In order to be attractive, you had to rely on something already popular. The dish that has really made an impact on the global spectrum is the pupusa. Today there are distributors that can ship authentic Salvadorian food products to the United States, making them easier to access.

Chef Carlos Cesario: When I moved to DC 15 years ago, there were not many Venezuelans in the area. I have seen the number increase since then. When you start an ethnic restaurant, the first people that come to eat your food are the people from that place. It takes time for it to become popular in the general population. When Venezuela expanded its oil production, the country became a melting pot. The oil economy attracted so many different nationalities. The country’s cuisine reflected the fusion of many different cultures from the Americas and elsewhere. Because of this, there are not many true “Venezuelan” dishes. The main ingredient that is traditionally Venezuelan would be the dough for the arepas (Venezuelan pupusa), a corn-based dough which you can now find at any supermarket.

Tim Carman: Is it easier to go to another country and find a receptive audience for your cuisine, or is it easier to promote your cuisine within your own country?

Sileshi Alifom: Within the Ethiopia market it is already saturated. More of the client base at DAS is travelers and tourists. However, there is a great demand for Ethiopian cuisine globally. Even within the United States. It is easy to promote ethnic
TASTING CONFLICT CUISINES: A CONVERSATION WITH TIM CARMAN

foods because humans all like to discover new tastes and ways to prepare everyday staples like cabbage or beans. Taking the cuisine outside of the country would be best for popularizing the tastes of Ethiopia.

Chef Mariano Ramos: Preparing food must take into account the market. It is also has to do a lot with what social class you’re tailoring your food to. For example, if you’re trying to sell food in Mexico in a street cart, you have to compete against all the other vendors who have already made it. If I were to go back to my own country, I would have to rework myself because of the classical French technique and American style I’ve learned, as well as the Mexican palate. I would be well positioned to use the strengths I developed in the United States to create new things.

Chef Benjamin Velasquez: Promoting a country’s cuisine also depends on what is happening in the region. The conflict in El Salvador and the large migration to the United States made Salvadorans one of the largest colonies of immigrants in the Washington metropolitan area in the 1980s. Those who fled the civil war worked in the area so that could send money back to their families. Many people in El Salvador wanted to be Americans because of the freedom and higher standard of living of this country. Now, two decades since the fighting stopped in El Salvador there are about 20 different culinary academies, which have opened in the last six years, making it the biggest country in Central America with culinary education.

Tim Carman asked the final question: Can the authenticity of a cuisine be preserved when a cuisine moves from one country to another?

Chef Mariano Ramos: Does it matter if it is authentic? What separates us from any other species in the world is that we use fire to cook, and we all use it. How a group of people has interpreted the flame and uses products that are geographically available to them is what makes the study of food and cuisine interesting. The definition of cooking is heat applied for a certain amount of time through some sort of medium on a set of ingredients. Cooking techniques, technology, and the ingredients come together forming the food culture of the country. When food moves from one culture to the next, the cooking techniques come with them, what changes are the ingredients. When it comes to bringing these cuisines to another country, certain restrictions in technology or tools can make traditional techniques impossible. For example, you cannot cook food underground and serve it to customers in the United States. However you can use a tandoor, and use the Mexican knowledge of ingredients and flavor to make a similar cuisine. We need to embrace change to grow.

Sileshi Aliform: The making of the traditional bread, the injera, depends on teff flour. For a long time you could not grow this in the United States, so it takes multiple ingredients to imitate the same product. This causes it to be heavier and no longer gluten free. But this innovation is what makes cuisine interesting! Today, the United States is growing the teff grass in Michigan and Idaho, making this important food product available to the large Ethiopian communities around the United States.

CULINARY DIPLOMATS AND NATION BRANDING

Counselor Adriana Velarde
Head of Cultural Diplomacy, Embassy of Peru, Washington, DC

Ambassador David Killion
Senior Chief of Staff, U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and former U.S. Ambassador to UNESCO

Patricia Jinich
Chef, Mexican Cultural Institute, and Cookbook Author, and Host of Pati’s Mexican Table, PBS

Brian McNair
Executive Director, World Central Kitchen

Moderator
Ambassador Anthony Quainton, Diplomat in Residence, American University

Benjamin Velasquez and Sileshi Aliform

Photo Credit: Sophia Pappalardo
DC’s changing culinary landscape illustrates how food is a reflection of culture and is increasingly an essential tool for diplomatic engagement. Forty years ago, the only ethnic cuisine to be found in the nation’s capital was Chinese and Mexican and neither was an authentic representation of the native cuisines. Today, DC offers a vibrant diversity of cuisine and celebrity chefs, which has strengthened the city’s own cultural fabric. Cold War conflicts produced the diaspora, starting with Viet Nam to the current immigrants from Iraq and Syria. These people opened up the community to the tastes and smells of their homelands. They also opened restaurants to offer a platform for showcasing a culture’s cuisine and a chef’s perspective, as well as better telling the story of a national culture. For the diplomatic corps the new cuisines of Washington provide a compelling venue for engagement on their individual cultures and politics. A discussion of how food is utilized by diplomats and who can also serve as culinary ambassadors is vital to understanding how cuisine defines a culture and its role in international relations.

**CHEFS AS GASTRODIPLOMATS**

As Head of Public Diplomacy at the Embassy of Peru in Washington, DC, First Secretary Adriana Velarde launched the discussion by speaking on the unique culinary brand of Peru and its public diplomacy initiatives employed to promote the brand abroad.

Velarde noted: Peru’s unique brand and national identity is vital to the national culture because Peruvians view themselves as a fusion of cultures that have blended many regional tastes to create a new flavor. Peru has started an initiative to increase the reputation of Peruvian cuisine. Their chefs are now recognized as gastronomic diplomats. This is especially relevant as there are often one or two Peruvian restaurants in most major cities in America. For the diplomatic corps the new cuisines of Washington provide a compelling venue for engagement on their individual cultures and politics.

Peru is receiving rising prominence as a major food travel destination. Peru was recently voted the best culinary destination in South America and currently preparations for regional Latin American cooking. It uses its chefs to promote the natural resources of indigenous crops such as quinoa. And Peru has been skillful in promoting its own cuisine to be found in the nation’s capital was Chinese and Mexican at all. After I assured her that I was born and raised there, Deen questioned, “What is that last name? Jewish?” While I understand people’s confusion over the diversity of Mexican cuisine, I am 100% Mexican.

One model that helps to envision Mexican history and culture is to picture it as a loom. The different cultures come together to weave different colors and textures together. Does your country have a cuisine that can withstand the changes of time? Do you have basic ingredients and traditions that have been passed down through generations? Although most people see Mexican cuisine as a mixture of indigenous and Spanish cultures, there is also a long tradition of African culture, which is often overlooked due to cultural prejudices, as well as French and Asian. They are all threads of Mexican cuisine, but there is something that makes it Mexican.

Once you lose the fear of knowing that now food is global, the borders are porous, you can recognize that something is true of all Mexican food that we want to serve at official events. The chefs’ professional sensibilities gave them very clear ideas of the types of food served at official events. And neither fried chicken nor hamburgers made the cut. However, once the chefs were finally convinced to try American cuisine, the results were a rousing success. The egalitarian food put people at ease, and created a much more pleasant environment, one conducive to diplomacy and cooperation.

**FOOD AS A VITAL TOOL OF DIPLOMACY**

Having previously served as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Ambassador David Killion, Senate Chief of Staff, U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, contributed anecdotes of the obstacles and successes he faced serving on the frontlines of culinary diplomacy in Paris.

Killion detailed: Culture is the currency at UNESCO. The delegates at UNESCO expected to be entertained Therefore, American cuisine could be a great weapon for the U.S delegation. As the U.S. Ambassador to UNESCO, I insisted that people enjoy the openness of American culture, including the openness of American cuisine.

Committing to providing the “homey” food that my wife and I love about America, we encountered one major problem. Mexican chefs. Rather than exporting an American chef, the State Department hires chefs from the local population. It was difficult to cajole, persuade, bribe, or even blackmail the chefs into cooking the typical (and often messy) American comfort food that we wanted to serve at official events. The chefs’ professional sensibilities gave them very clear ideas of the types of food served at official events, and neither fried chicken nor hamburgers made the cut. However, once the chefs were finally convinced to try American cuisine, the results were a rousing success. The egalitarian food put people at ease, and created a much more pleasant environment, one conducive to diplomacy and cooperation.

**A CULINARY MOSAIC THAT BRIDGES DIVIDES AND CONNECTS COMMUNITIES**

Although she launched her career in Washington as a political analyst, Patricia Jinich gave up being a policy wonk to pursue her love of food. She is a cooking teacher, food writer, and official Chef of the Mexican Cultural Institute in Washington, DC. She is a culinary ambassador that has promoted the best of Mexican cuisine. Having grown up in a diverse culture, Jinich brought to the discussion ideas on what is authentic cuisine and how food bridges divides and connects communities.

Jinich explained: Mexico struggles to define its identity and to blend each aspect into a cohesive “Mexican cuisine.” Visiting Cuba a year ago, I was incredibly disappointed with the asphyxiation that has starved their cuisine. With the decades long embargo, Cubans can’t even purchase the groceries to make their traditional dishes. There is a loss of tradition and culture that will hopefully be revised with future trade relations.

It is a situation I keep in mind when people ask, “What is authentic Mexican?” People rarely think I can answer that question. Before appearing on the TV show of Paula Deen, the Southern chef looked at me and said, “You don’t look authentic Mexican at all.” After I assured her that I was born and raised there, Deen questioned, “What is that last name? Jewish?” While I understand people’s confusion over the diversity of Mexican cuisine, I am 100% Mexican.

FOOD AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE

As a social entrepreneur, Brian McNair, Executive Director, World Central Kitchen, Chef Jose Andres’ international NGO, has been using the power of food to change lives for twenty years. McNair shared his experiences in Haiti and how chefs are using food as an agent of change.

McNair expounded: Focusing on health, hunger, workforce development, and social enterprise, the World Central Kitchen works to empower impoverished and hungry communities to act as a catalyst for change in the lives of people. One recent project is expanding an orphanage in Haiti to be self-sustaining. A tilapia farm and chicken huts have been installed, from which the orphanage can raise revenue from selling excess food. Clean cook stoves have been installed that require little to no charcoal to cook. In addition, a bakery has been built to teach the children a trade as well as provide their daily bread. The chefs of the World Central Kitchen seek to provide a holistic approach to smart solutions for hunger. This is especially important in cultures where access to food has been a defining part of the nation’s history.

**“The distinctiveness of national cultures is reflected in the food and in the way that food is presented to other cultures.”**

Ambassador Anthony Quaintin
Diplomat in Residence
American University

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Why are stories a defining component of conflict cuisine? Stories were woven throughout presentations in each segment of the conference and whether told by immigrant chefs or of streets vendors, many of the stories noted that some form of hunger drove a need to use food as a means of communication, as a form of personal expression. These stories are not only about hunger, but also about survival and resilience. Immigrants to come to America are all about surviving. Food becomes a means of earning a living but also a way of connecting people back to their homelands.

To conclude the day’s events, Dr. Johanna Mendelson Forman, Scholar-in-Residence, School of International Service, American University, had a one-on-one conversation with Nikki Silva, co-host, The Kitchen Sisters; and Producer, NPR’s DuPont Award winter series Hidden Kitchens, on the essential role of stories in defining conflict cuisine and building awareness by the public and policymakers of the key issues that comprise conflict cuisine.

FOOD AS A CONVERSATION STARTER

The discussion began with Nikki Silvia noting that one way to start a conversation about food is to ask, “What did you have for breakfast today?”

Silva explained: Asking this non-threatening question is the easiest way to loosen people up because it is a question everyone knows the answer to. It can open people up to conversation in a way you might never expect.

One of the first pieces I did for the Hidden Kitchen series on National Public Radio was about the George Forman grill. My partner Davia Nelson and I found that it has become an underground kitchen for homeless people and new immigrants to the country. There are people who hide the grill under their beds because they live in apartments where they are not allowed to cook or don’t have kitchens, and there are homeless who plug the grill straight into a streetlight for electricity. As part of the story, I interviewed George Forman to see if he knew how the grill was being used. He was astonished. That surprising start to a conversation led him to share his own story of growing up hungry in Houston, Texas. He recalled that when the other children in school would go in for lunch and he couldn’t afford to have any. Instead of buying lunch for 27 cents, he would blow up a paper bag to look full and take it into the lunchroom to throw away to pretend he had eaten that day. He then spoke about how “hunger makes you angry.” As a young kid he turned to the streets robbing people. What pulled him out of this angry place was the Job Corps. Later, when he lived with a family in Seattle he noticed he was eating every meal as if it were his last until he realized “I’m going to have three meals a day no matter what.”

USING FOOD TO CHANGE PERCEPTIONS

Silva noted that the conference included a wonderful fusion of academics, chefs, and storytellers, and was truly struck by the unexpected stories that came up, such as the histories of street vendors. This fusion with storytelling is the way to ignite the message of conflict cuisine to reach the masses.

Mendelson Forman pointed out in countries that had experienced internal conflicts such as Peru it was important to see how food had helped create a transformation in the public perception of a once war-torn society. She detailed: Since the end of the guerrilla movement, Sendero Luminoso, Peru has created a new persona as a culinary destination. It was moving to hear an earlier panelist talk of travelling back to Peru, and who was in tears describing this transition from a conflict torn nation to a place that people were clamoring to visit. For Peru this new image has called attention to a very important cultural heritage that includes making the potato an indigenous crop of the Andes and quinoa, a central part of the new Andean cuisine. You get passion when people recognize that food is a bond.

Silva’s storytelling format of collecting and sharing information about poverty, hunger, and access to food that we all need to be well-informed, said Mendelson Forman.

Silva responded: People tend to turn their ears off when hearing about homelessness or conflict, so using food as a tool to explore difficult issues gives a reporter a way in without putting pressure on the person being interviewed.

Storytelling about conflict is the hook to get people interested in these issues, such as Israel and Palestine and the Hummus Wars. For example, during the Does Food Build Peace or Drive Conflict? session that discussed cooking in conflict countries, the cookbook was a stealthy
weapon that not only provided recipes, but also provided the story behind the acquisition of the foods included in the collection.

Mendelson Forman asked how our globalized food system is a bearer of culture, noting it was interesting that during the conference the word “globalization” was not used at all in the panel discussions.

Silva suggested the chef’s conversations on an earlier panel that discussed food traveling and changing as it arrived in the United States is something that reflects the globalized nature of food in this century. For chefs this is exciting. It allows them to transcend borders and talk about creating a new cuisine that integrates the influences of many nations.

Food is a dynamically changing issue. It is affected by climate change and agricultural practices. We know so much about conflict and food, but we don’t put them together. Because learning about food is really so multidisciplinary, it’s difficult to place it into any “pigeon hole” or to study it through only one lens.

FOOD AS A NATIONAL SECURITY ISSUE

In the final question of the conversation, Mendelson Forman asked if food will become a national security issue?

Silva responded: Food is already a national security issue, and the conversation we began today through the conference underscores this reality. Access to food is essential to survival. Today it is in the interest of the United States to ensure that no matter how conflictive a place exists food will be important to the stabilization of any situation. Beyond bringing people together, food must be considered a tool of peace-building by providing for the needs of those affected by conflict.

Food is a wonderful way to bring people together to talk about difficult issues in a globalized age.
Roger Mark De Souza is the director of population, environmental security, and resilience for the Wilson Center. He leads programs on climate change and resilience, including the Global Sustainability and Resilience Program, and previously worked as the Chief of the Climate Change and Resilience Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. His expertise includes climate change, sustainability, and global environmental security. He has been involved in various initiatives and projects focusing on climate change adaptation, resilience, and sustainable development.

Christine Fair, Associate Professor, Georgetown University, School of Foreign Service, author of Cooking in the Axis of Evil

Christine Fair is an Associate Professor at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service. Her research focuses on political and military affairs in South Asia. Prior to joining the School of Foreign Service, she served as a senior political scientist with the RAND Corporation, a political officer to the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan in Kabul, and as a senior research associate in the USIP Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention. She has authored or co-authored several books and articles, and served as the editorial board of History, Small Wars and Insurgencies, Asia Policy, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, and India Review. Her publications are available at www.christinefair.net

Patricia Pinto-João, Notable Writers

Patricia Pinto-João is a Portuguese writer, essayist, and cultural critic. She has written extensively on topics related to literature, cinema, and contemporary culture. Pinto-João has also served as a professor of literature at the University of Minho and has been a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley. Her contributions to the field of criticism have been recognized with numerous awards and distinctions.

Mariano Ramos, Culinary Arts Instructor, Carlos Rosario Public Charter School

Chef Mariano Ramos, Sonia Gutierrez Center, Carlos Rosario Public Charter School

Chef Mariano Ramos has been a key figure in the culinary arts community in Washington, D.C., with over two decades of experience. He has worked in various positions, including Sous Chef at Rosa Mexicano at the F Street location in DC. Chef Ramos has also been involved in several culinary programs and events, including the Taste of DC street food festival. His dedication to the culinary arts has earned him numerous accolades and recognitions.

Pati Jinich is the host of the public television series Pati’s Mexican Table, PBS, and cookbook author

Pati Jinich has been a leading figure in the world of Mexican cuisine, with a focus on modernizing traditional dishes while preserving their authentic flavors. She has authored several cookbooks, including “Comida Mexicanas” and “Pati’s Mexican Table,” which have gained widespread popularity. Jinich is also a food writer and has contributed to various publications, including Food Network magazine, Men’s Journal, and The Washington Post.

Brian McNair, Executive Director, World Central Kitchen

Brian McNair has been a driving force behind the World Central Kitchen, an organization that provides relief in disaster zones around the world. He has led the organization through several high-profile disasters, including hurricanes, earthquakes, and other natural disasters. McNair’s passion for cooking and his experience in food service have allowed him to make a significant impact in the relief efforts post-disaster.

Chris Killion, Former U.S. Representative to UNESCO

Ambassador David Killion was nominated as U.S. Permanent Representative to UNESCO with the rank of Ambassador on June 25, 2009 by President Obama and was sworn into office on August 12, 2009. Prior to his appointment, Mr. Killion served as a Senior Professional Staff Member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and was the Committee’s top expert on International Organizations and State Department Operations. Mr. Killion also served as top UN advisor to the previous Chair and Ranking Member of the Committee, the late Congressman Tom Lantos (D-CA). Prior to serving on the Foreign Affairs Committee, Mr. Killion was an appointee of the Clinton Administration in the Department of State, in the bureau of Legislative Affairs (1996-2001) and as a legislative assistant to Congressman David Skaggs (D- CO) (1994-1996). Mr. Killion holds a BA in International Relations from Middlebury College, a Master of International Affairs from Columbia University, an M.A. from the University of California at Los Angeles, and an M.A. from the University of California at Los Angeles.

Yael Luttwak, President and CEO of Slim Peace, and filmmaker

Yael Luttwak is a filmmaker and founder of Slim Peace, a non-profit organization that emerged from her documentary film, A Slim Peace. Her work has been featured in various festivals and events, including the Sundance Film Festival. Luttwak is also a successful businesswoman, having founded Slim Peace and other companies. She has been recognized with numerous awards and distinctions for her contributions to the field of filmmaking and social entrepreneurship.

Anthony Quainton, Diplomat in Residence, American University

Anthony Quainton has been a diplomat and educator for over 30 years. He has served in various capacities, including as a political analyst, and completed a Master’s degree in Latin American Studies. Quainton is a leading expert on Latin American and Caribbean affairs and has contributed extensively to the field through his research, writing, and teaching.

Sudipto Bose, ex-corporate executive

Sudipto Bose is a former executive of a leading corporate firm. He has extensive experience in the corporate world, having worked in various roles, including senior management positions. Bose is currently working on a new venture, focusing on innovation and technology-driven solutions. His expertise in corporate strategy and execution has enabled him to make significant contributions to the field.

Seth Gillman, Professor, University of Connecticut

Seth Gillman is a professor at the University of Connecticut, specializing in the history of science and technology. His research focuses on the development of technology and its impact on society. Gillman has published extensively on these topics, including in the book “Selling Science: How the Persuasion of Science Shaped the Modern World.” He is also involved in the organization of several international conferences and events.

Adriana Velarde, former government official

Adriana Velarde has held several key government positions, including as the Head of Diplomacy for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Peru. She has also worked in various international organizations, including the Diplomatic Academy of Peru. Velarde is a leading expert on international diplomacy and has contributed significantly to the field through her research and teaching.

Anthony Silva, Radio Host and Exhibition Curator

Anthony Silva is a radio host and exhibition curator with a focus on regional history. He has worked on several projects to showcase the history and culture of the Santa Cruz region, including the World Famous Tree Circus exhibit. Silva has a deep understanding of the power and potential of diplomacy to connect cultures and address global challenges. He has served at the Embassy of Peru in Washington, D.C. since 2013, and also served in several other positions. Silva is a key figure in promoting cultural exchange and diplomacy.
Conflict Cuisine® began as a course at American University’s School of International Service, which looked at how food of the diaspora communities in Washington reflected the state of conflicts around the globe. The course also examined why food is a form of Smart Power, but could also be a driver of conflict even in the 21st century. Through this course we have grown a lively discussion on why in zones of conflict food becomes central to both survival and resilience. We have also recognized the power of food to create dialogue among communities who come to the United States by providing not only sustenance but also understanding of the diverse cultural roots that have created new tastes and appetites in the American palate.

For more information on the program, recent press, and upcoming events, visit: conflictcuisine.com