

**THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO**

**The Veggie Option:**

**How regional/ethnic cuisines are adapting tradition for plant-based consumers.**

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## Introduction

Through an ethnography of regional/ethnic restaurants and their staff in Chicago, this paper explores how regional cuisines are adapting their culinary traditions, conventions, and perceptions to accommodate customers who abstain from eating animal products. The purpose of this endeavor is to shine a light on the relationship between culture and food, specifically how the latter is significant for ethnic and community identity and how diverse groups navigate the increasing prevalence of plant-based dietary philosophies in the United States. Although vegetarianism, veganism, and other forms of animal product avoidance have long histories in philosophy and religion, the contemporary movement's size and influence play a significant role in shaping the cuisines that they embrace. The findings of this research enrich the anthropological study of food and cuisine by shedding light on the ever-evolving culinary practices of different ethnic communities in the United States. In particular, said findings are important in illuminating how different communities negotiate a balance between traditional recipes and the growth of plant-based consumer demand.

This research primarily took place at two restaurants that serve regional cuisines and offer plant-based options in Chicago, Illinois, specializing in Mexican and Greek cuisine respectively. To best analyze the influence of plant-based demand on regional cooking, I selected restaurants whose cuisines are normally associated, in the U.S., with meat-heavy dishes. Ethnographic work in multiple restaurants allows me to investigate how different culinary traditions approach the predicament of catering to vegetarians and vegans. I also conducted several semi-formal interviews with owners, cooks, and other staff members to directly assess the steps they took to cater toward plant-based customers and their opinions about plant-based dietary philosophies. I argue that restaurants serving regional/ethnic cuisine develop different strategies in order to cater

toward plant-based customers. These approaches have changed the way they structure their menus, their kitchens, and have pushed restaurants to engage with their culinary traditions in new ways. Additionally, while not opposed to plant-based dietary philosophies, ethnic communities perceive a fine line of distinction that separates traditional cuisine from abomination.

### **Literature Review**

Food, as well as its associated meanings and rituals, bring us together at mealtimes and gives us an excuse to catch up with old friends. Furthermore, food and cuisine have a long and storied history within anthropology. Anthropologists have long focused on food, examining hunting and gathering strategies, foods as resources, and visible traditions surrounding the act of eating (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). Claude Lévi-Strauss devoted extensive study to the symbolic place of food in different societies. He argued that cooking was a form of complex and contradictory language (2012). Lévi-Strauss inspired researchers such as Mary Douglas and others to see food as more than an aggregate of agricultural products, calories, and mealtime practices. It is within this broader picture of cuisine that many contemporary scholars, and this paper itself, find themselves examining food as an element of culture that grants insight into beliefs, values, and social structures. This study draws on existing scholarship on food and ethnicity, cultural change in cuisine, the budding study of vegetarian/vegan/plant-based cuisine, and the ethnographic study of foodservice labor.

Food has been repeatedly examined as capturing and representing ethnic or national identities and as transmitting cultural continuity for diasporic groups (Hashimoto & Telfer 2015, Timothy and Ron 2013). Hashimoto & Telfer (2015) argue that holding onto culinary traditions allows migrants to maintain a symbolic and physical connection to their homelands. They compliment Timothy and Ron's assertion by claiming, "Food heritage and identity can also be

created by, and associated with, social class, wealth discrepancy, gender distinction, and in today's societies, food philosophies" (144-159).

Moreover, food is known to cement social bonds. Suhaimi and Zahari (2014) state that food creates social alliances, acting as glue for a community, one with a shared history that is displaced outside a home country. Based on these arguments, the cuisines of immigrant communities hold a critical role in social cohesion, and the modification of recipes and culinary heritage to serve plant-based customers could pose a potential threat to a diaspora community's connection to their culture. This study is poised to record how culinary traditions are being altered in the vegetarian turn and if this affects immigrants' perceptions of identity.

Critical to an understanding of food as part of community dynamics is the examination of "authenticity". Authenticity is an incredibly nebulous and even controversial topic. One person's authentic culinary tradition could be viewed by another as a horrific bastardization of all the things that make up a dish. Byrd views authenticity as a concept employed by social groups that "... cements their ownership of cultural capital to distinguishing groups based on what they possess. Identity then ties people to these groups" (2017). Byrd's assertion of food as cultural capital echoes positions of authentic dishes as a form of identity creation and separation. Furthermore, Byrd claims that food producers use management of public image, tradition, media, and ingredients to convey authenticity. Due to the importance of authentic cuisine as a marker of community identity, changes to menu and ingredients might call into question the authenticity of menu options and the restaurant as a whole.

As menus and recipes are adjusted to meet plant-based demand, foodservice workers' relationship with the food may change as well. Shigihara's (2014) ethnographic study of restaurant workers demonstrates how these jobs influence identity, community, and relationships.

Since foodservice jobs affect an individual's concept of self, foodservice workers who are engaged with preparing food tied to their ethnic identity might have a stronger connection between their work and their identity. Therefore, this study seeks to further explore the place of food as an artifact of culture in diaspora communities, how these artifacts are being changed due to an increase in the demand for meatless meals, and how these changes are perceived by the communities involved in regional cuisine preparation. While most of the research regarding regional cuisine is focused on statistical and historical analyses, I believe that an ethnographic approach will shed light on how plant-based modifications impact the traditions, identity, and integrity of regional cuisines. I build on Shigihara's research by placing myself in the context of the restaurants and developing a rapport with their respective staffs. My research closely investigates how food service workers personally relate to their food and how shifting menus may affect this relationship. Vegetarians and vegans are not only changing the physical manifestations of cuisine tradition within different ethnic groups but how it is changing how members of these groups perceive their food's relationship to themselves.

Change is an important theme in this study. In her ethnography of Korean food across the United States, Ryang claims that Korean cuisine, and all cuisines, are constantly changing and evolving. What can be considered traditional, authentic, or important to community identity are in a state of flux (2015). As different ethnic groups migrate to new regions, they bring with them the foods they consider essential to their culture. Ryang outlines the external forces that shape food and food culture as human movement, cultural adaptation and assimilation, and innovation, specifically regarding Korean cuisine in Korea and the U.S. while speaking of food as culture (2015). Furthermore, once in a new environment, the ingredients and cuisine influence the surrounding composite culture; the collective values, beliefs, and traditions that make up a

particular location, and vice versa (Frost and Liang, 2015). Boch et al. argue “that regional versions of the composite culture change as ethnic groups come to define a region demographically and culturally” (2020). This has led to innumerable examples of dishes derived from regional cuisines becoming mainstays in greater American cuisine and the commodification of traditional recipes for the American palate. The increased demand for plant-based menu options in the U.S. forms part of the composite culture surrounding ethnic communities, which in turn influences the ingredients used, the methods of preparation and cooking, and their cultural value. I expand upon Boch et al. and Ryang by taking a closer look at how the culinary conventions of a particular regional cuisine are affected by the conventions of plant-based dietary philosophies.

Krishnendu Ray provides historical context to the changing cuisine of the U.S. by cataloging the evolution of American restaurant cuisine from its Western European roots (2007). Ray charts how different regional cuisines and ingredients became increasingly popular dining locations as different immigrant communities made the U.S their new home. The author also argues for a multi-ethnic study that compares how different ethnic groups who are engaged in food service perceive their craft and place in American culture in order to gather a more varied pool of practices and perspectives. I am answering Ray’s call for a multi-ethnic study by selecting two restaurants serving different cuisines and that employ staff from different backgrounds. This will allow me to better catalog the precise steps taken by these communities and assist in adding a comparative element to the study of regional cuisines in the United States as well as advance the knowledge of American restaurant cuisine evolution.

Looking at plant-based cuisine itself presents an interesting case study of the dynamic between culinary traditions and plant-based modification. In recent years, the number of people

in the United States who follow dietary philosophies that abstain or reduce consumption of animal-foods has significantly increased (Buchholz, 2022. Forgive, 2021). There has also been a coinciding increase of restaurants and food manufacturers developing options to accommodate this growing demand. More specifically, many restaurants that serve regional cuisines have reconfigured their menu options to serve these customers (Forgive, 2021). Some regionally oriented restaurants have incorporated plant-based meat substitutes such as branded meat replacements, soy-based options, and legume focused dishes; others shift towards different, traditionally meatless dishes. It is these ingredients that make up the foundation of vegetarian and vegan diets and plant-based modifications to traditional cuisine.

Several researchers have examined the increase in adherents to vegetarian and vegan lifestyles within a larger national context, similar to what I am inspecting in Chicago. Aysu Altaş carried out research in Türkiye revealing the current situation of vegetarianism and veganism in the country as well as preparing the groundwork for further studies (2017). They conclude that while vegetarianism and veganism are just starting to establish a foothold in Türkiye, it is possible for the country to become a preferred destination among practitioners of these dietary philosophies because many traditional Turkish dishes are already plant-based. My study takes a different approach by asking how the population of vegetarian and vegan diners are changing culturally bound dishes that are not inherently plant-based. This angle provides texture to the literature through studying the active interaction between regional cuisines and plant-based consumers, particularly how the latter is causing changes in the former. While Altaş' work gives us insight into Türkiye's plant-based foods, it is critical to examine how other cultures approach making a dish free of animal products.

Research done in China about its gradually increasing vegetarian population and the nation's philosophical history with meatless diets argues that due to the breadth of meat substitutes in Chinese cuisine, it is mainly social cohesion that prevents people from eating less animal products (Cao, 2018). Cao substantiates this claim by listing common options, "Chinese vegetarian cuisine has many fake meat dishes complete with meat dish names - bean curd skin becoming mock poultry, wheat gluten standing in for meat, smoked sausage molded out of beans and flour, chicken replaced with compressed [tofu], deep-fried mushrooms and bamboo shoots presented as crispy pork strips and fish, and sweet and sour pork made from soybean layers..." (2018). Similar to the Altaş piece, Cao is taking traditional cuisine and explaining its applicability to growing populations who abstain from eating meat. Chinese meat replacements serve to mimic the tastes and textures of meat. These culinary inventions were developed to offer plant-based alternatives and reflect similar cultural evolution to what my research will investigate. This ethnography works comparatively with Cao's research by deciphering how cuisines adapt a meat dish to become plant-based. By placing my research within the U.S. and among its immigrant communities, I position myself to have increased access to regional cuisines of multiple origins and heritages as well as communities facing new economic incentives to adapt their cuisines. As researchers like Cao and myself continue to study food culture all over the world, the academic literature will eventually be able to provide insight into how different countries and cuisines undergo similar or disparate processes of adapting to plant-based consumption.

The adaptation of culinary tradition presents a philosophical dilemma for regional/ethnic groups: when changing a recipe for plant-based diets, does the food maintain the same character? As dishes are transformed to remove meat ingredients, they are physically altered but still hold



their symbolic value. Liora Gvion-Rosenberg claims the process of changing a dish to be meat-free does not inherently change culinary conventions (1990). This may seem true at first glance, but the physical actions needed to compose a dish without meat can be drastically different. They require different temperatures, tools, techniques, and a minimization of cross-contamination. These actions indicate change in culinary convention and thereby a change to tradition. This paper argues that changes in preparation methods or ingredients result in symbolically different dishes.

Examining plant-based dietary philosophies and how they interact with the food heritage of ethnic communities, I also look closely at the physical changes that occur inside of the restaurants, how traditional recipes and food preparation practices have been altered to take a dish made traditionally with meat and make it vegetarian or vegan friendly. My examination of the effects of plant-based demand will shed light on Hashimoto and Telfer's claim regarding food and ethnic identity, specifically how plant-based demand affects the relationship between regional culinary conventions in Chicago. I examine how increased demand from plant-based customers might be promoting or challenging ethnic communities' constitutions, querying whether plant-based modification strengthens, weakens, or helps maintain community integrity.

As Byrd states, "... food is never reducible to what appears on a plate; it is a complex set of interactions around labor, culture, industry, inequality, etc., coming together to determine what we eat on a daily basis" (2017). This paper seeks to unravel how the increasing prevalence of plant-based consumers in the United States is changing regional/ethnic restaurants menu offerings, culinary traditions, and the values and senses of identity that are held by their associated ethnic communities and staff.

## Methodology

I employed participant observation as the primary tool in this research. This necessitates active involvement with the restaurants in multiple aspects such as the role of customer. I was granted permission to observe behind the counter at Taqueria Varitas, which allowed me to develop an understanding of how the complex organization of a food service kitchen has also evolved to serve meat abstaining customers. Participant observation gave me better insight into the inner workings of the restaurants, who so kindly let me use their dining rooms and kitchens as field sites. Alas, due to food safety concerns and proper kitchen etiquette, I was limited in how far I could go “behind the scenes”. For example, while the staff at Athena was very accommodating, I was politely refused when I inquired about possibly talking to cooks or seeing the kitchen.

I also conducted semi-formal interviews with owners, cooks, and staff in order to learn about the details of how they’ve tackled the challenge of vegetarian and vegan demand. More than that, these interviews gave me a chance to ask for the thoughts and options of restaurant staff. Did they feel their traditions were threatened? How do they perceive the growth of plant-based dietary philosophies? These were the questions that I wanted to hear answered from the very people who are dealing with balancing the demand for authenticity and accommodation on a daily basis.

Authenticity and accommodations are but two of the stressors that create a restaurant. Restaurants are an organized chaos that possesses something beautiful, emotive, and personal: from the powerful aromas, cacophony of kitchen equipment, and shouted orders, to the flow state many cooks find themselves inhabiting. Restaurants have also captured the fascination of the

general public in entertainment. Recent entries in the genre such as the streaming show *The Bear* and classic docu-series like *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown* have sought to capture the Apollonian and Dionysian conflict that goes on behind the scenes of your local go-to. Many individuals have personal experience in food service, whether as a minimum wage barista at a chain coffee shop or bussing tables for the well-to-do. I believe that's where my obsession with cooking started, but it may go deeper than that.

I worked in food service for several years and developed a connection with the food I was handling. It changed what I ate as well as how I perceived the things I was putting into my body. Most notably, I slowly grew a deep love for cooking and using my brain, my hands, and my imagination to manifest parts of my personality in what I was serving to other human beings. Despite the immense pressure of working in a commercial kitchen, especially on a busy night, I found that I could unlock a flow state fueled by adrenaline that led to self-expression.

This is what has led me down the path of studying restaurants that serve regional/ethnic cuisines. As I explore the endless flavors of food, I want to see how the rapidly changing world around us is altering some of the traditions we hold most dear. I know that my cultural background, my beliefs, and my tastes influence how I cook for myself and how circumstance, audience, and my culinary knowledge force me to create in new ways when cooking for others. I believe that this extends, granted on a much more complex and broader scale, to restaurants.

## **The Taco Shop**

Many might share the experience of having a friend who swears by the family-owned taqueria that makes the best tacos they have ever had. That friend is probably describing a community cornerstone like Taqueria Varitas. The restaurant contains a seating area, a bathroom, the counter one orders at with space behind for shelves and fridges, and an enticingly aromatic kitchen. The seating area holds a few small tables that could seat around 15-20 people. One wall of the room is a window that faces the parking lot and the other is covered by a mural that spans the whole wall. The mural depicts a courtyard that is dominated by a large fountain supported by three blueish-green lions. The background is made up of the brightly colored facades of buildings and a little girl making a wish. On the wall in the back of the dining area hangs a TV and two guitars on either side with a metal bar line situated beneath. More small pieces of decor adorn the restaurant's interior, and they represent its owners' personalities and history. A statue of Jesus Christ, a cheesy sign about Taco Tuesday on the counter, and what appears to be a personal painting of a table setting tucked near the window. It's the little touches of the personality that give Taqueria Varitas an almost home-like vibe, which matches perfectly with the kind and welcoming attitudes of its staff.

Taqueria Varitas is the smallest in scale of the two investigated in this study, both in terms of staff and space. I selected this restaurant based on reviews on Google Maps and a PDF of their menu I found online. Based on a precursory online impression, I was able to ascertain that; Taqueria Varitas self-identifies as an authentic Mexican/Mexican-American restaurant, that their cuisine authentically represents their culture, and that they serve plant-based options. One thing that piqued my interest was the presence of non-traditional ingredients in their plant-based dishes that still attempts to preserve culinary conventions. From a distance Taqueria Varitas seemed to

be a perfect example of the types of accommodation to vegan and vegetarian customers I was interested in studying.

The restaurant is owned and operated by Alejandra and her husband Pedro, who is the head chef. They opened in 2017 and have been operating entirely by themselves since. Alejandra and Pedro employ a small staff of additional cooks, and Alejandra's sister works at the counter when she is not there herself. Located in the Bronzeville neighborhood, the taco shop serves a predominantly black community and has found immense praise from its regulars. The relationship goes both ways, as one anecdote from Alejandra shows, *"I think after being there for 6 years, it's strengthened our community and acceptance towards us because we came into a space that was predominantly African American, and because of their history they don't really trust others coming into their space... But now, you know, I have kids [from the community]. I had a kid come in on Friday that I've known for 6 years and now he's come in to tell me that his girlfriend's pregnant. It's so exciting. He just came in to say that to me. He didn't order food, none of that. So it's very heartwarming to be part of creating an atmosphere for people to remember me or remember us, remember our food, remember it was a safe space, a comfortable space. Aside from just the food aspect of it. And also being able to offer healthier options in the community where there's not a lot of healthy options"*. Through the thick and thin, including the COVID-19 pandemic and severe flooding, Pedro, Alejandra, and their team provide Mexican and Mexican-American classics to their community and they have taken the challenge of serving vegetarian and vegan customers in strides.

Taqueria Varitas' menu showcases burritos, tortas, quesadillas, tacos, and many other Mexican staples. Each dish on the menu can be prepared with a variety of different protein options; such as carne asada, al pastor, lengua, shrimp, or tofu (served al pastor or jerk style).

Tofu is joined by five more plant-based options; chile relleno, grilled veggies, mushroom (al pastor or jerk style), rice and beans, and soy steak. Taqueria Varitas tackles the challenges posed by vegetarian and vegan demand by implementing two tactics of accommodation through adaptation. The first tactic is by taking conventions from traditional Mexican/Mexican-American cuisine, and putting them on the menu. For example, *chile relleno* (chili stuffed with cheese), which is a common entrée in Mexican/Mexican-American cuisine has been retrofitted into dishes like *tortas* (sandwiches) to provide another option for plant-based customers. The second tactic is the use of non-traditional ingredients like tofu and soy steak. Dishes in this context are highly customizable. Pedro showed me how he makes the sauces he cooks proteins in vegan as a baseline, which he then can apply to the meat and meat-free dishes. For example, while mushrooms are present and thoroughly relished in Mexican cuisine, Pedro uses them as a meat-substitute and grills them similarly as he would carnitas or birra. This not only allows for more customization for patrons, but fuses the practices of making sauces and moles that are essential to Mexican cuisine with new, plant-based ingredients like tofu and soy steak.

Along with the vegan master sauces and moles, Pedro has also reorganized the line to prevent cross-contamination. Given the sometimes sticky situation one can find themselves in when handling cheese, he organized his trays that hold ingredients like cilantro, onion, lettuce, and tomato so he would never be handling any of the vegan ingredients after dairy products. The concerns of vegetarian and vegan customers have been part of their philosophy since they opened their doors. Initially, they were inspired by Alejandra's cousin to make sure grilled vegetables were an option for meatless customers, but they later began to experiment with other ingredients that better replicate the nutritional and flavor profiles of meat. They thus found themselves preparing untraditional ingredients like tofu and soy steak as well as modifying the

physical layout of the kitchen. This transition is an ever evolving process; for a while they offered a soy chorizo option but it was not selling sufficiently despite the success of their soy steak. Ultimately, Pedro claims it has not been an insurmountable challenge to accommodate vegetarians and vegans because many of the core elements of Mexican cuisine are plant-based. He explained, *“I think that our cuisine, Mexican cuisine, is very vegetarian based. My grandmother would always have cactus. She would just grill it, put it in a taco, have a piece of cheese, maybe some salsa, and that was her meal. Like lentils, beans, and cheeses are very popular... My mom would make calabacitas, which is squash with vegetables or with some beans on the side. The main dish is the squash with the sauce and the beans. If you have cheese, you eat the cheese, and if you don't, you don't. But I think in a way, it also brought us back to our roots of recipes that our moms and grandmas would make”*. Here, we see how the core plant-based elements of Mexican/Mexican-American cuisine are found in traditional dishes. With some tweaking of sauces, moles, optional components like cheese, and ingredient line management, the culinary traditions that form the foundation of Taqueria Varitas’ menu leave many avenues for adaptation and experimentation so all customers can leave with a smile and *“a full belly”*. I will speak more about the meanings of Alejandra and Pedro’s perspectives and how plant-based demand affects their relationship to their food in the section on perspectives.



Jerk tofu taco (2 corn tortillas, jerk tofu, lettuce, onion, cilantro, and tomato) with salsa roja.

Courtesy of Taqueria Varitas, photograph by Hayden Bidinger, 2024.

### **The Taverna**

The next restaurant I studied in my field research is Athena, which serves Greek/Greek-American cuisine and is located in the Greektown neighborhood of Chicago. Compared to Taqueria Varitas, Athena is an entirely different kind of business. Of course, they serve Greek food as opposed to Mexican but there is also a large difference in scale. Not only is the physical space larger, but Athena employs a massive staff who hold varying levels of personal connection to Greek cuisine. The first thing to greet a patron upon physically entering the restaurant are large wooden doors in the center of which is a glass window shaped as the silhouette of the namesake goddess' helmeted head. Once you enter, there's a reception counter where a host will have you seated you in one of four dining rooms. First, there are a few high top tables directly inside the main entrance as well as a large fully stocked and staffed bar. Second, there is an entirely insular dining room to the left of the receptionist's desk. This room lies under



a heavily ornamented blue glass chandelier and also holds a large marble fireplace that depicts Prometheus stealing fire for humanity. Third, there is a picturesque and “Instagramable” large dining space that is illuminated by a wall made entirely of windows that faces the street and is capped by a glass roof. Along the back wall of this dining room is a massive frieze containing Athena’s marble-sculpted face as well as images of chariots and horses that invoke Athen’s famous Parthenon. Lastly, there is an outdoor patio toward the back of the restaurant. This room is bordered by a wall of ivy and a trickling waterfall, and filled with a few Greek flag umbrellas as well as tables and chairs for al fresco dining. The whole restaurant is covered in teals, Aegean blue, and the textures of limestone and marble. Overall, Athena’s atmosphere combines the modern and the classical. Some walls hold small, abstract glass vases that are placed directly next to traditional-looking Greek ceramics and kylixes. The music motivates this mix of old and new as it consists of contemporary Greek pop songs which, at least to the ears of Americans such as myself, fuse together rhythm and instruments from the past with the urgency and melodies of the present. Needless to say, Athena is a large and upscale establishment that seeks to present itself not only as a fine-dining experience but also a way to enjoy the near-mythological culinary traditions of Greece.

I chose to study Athena as a representation of Greek cuisine in Chicago based on several factors and circumstances. I first learned of the restaurant at Chicago’s annual Taste of Greektown festival, where the restaurant joined other businesses in the neighborhood in setting up stalls to serve more portable versions of their typical menu offerings. From there, I used Google Maps and their website to scope out what menu options they had for customers who followed a plant-based dietary philosophy and how much the menu reflected dishes that are perceived to be traditionally Greek. Due the restaurant's prominence within Greektown and the

menu reflecting traditional Greek cuisine, the restaurant serves as an important case study of how culinary conventions are being adapted to meet plant-based demand.

At the time I began visiting and studying Athena, the menu contained 27 options that were vegetarian friendly and 12.5 options that were vegan friendly. These options included spreads served with pita or vegetables; e.g. tirokafteri, hummus, tzatziki, and melitzanosalata, as well as appetizers, salads, vegetable kabob, several side dishes, and four demarcated vegetarian entrees such as spanakopita and vegetarian mousakas. Also of note, the restaurant offers a dessert menu which contains entirely vegetarian options such as baklava, portokalopita, and galaktoboureko, but nothing for vegan diners. From the menu alone, I learned that Athena does make great effort to communicate and offer plant-based dishes but chooses to remain mostly in the realm of traditional Greek/Greek-American ingredients.

The sheer size of Athena as a restaurant and as a business caused me to change my approach to studying the restaurant's cuisine. Instead of engaging with owners and kitchen staff directly, I knew my exchanges would be limited to management, waiters, and hosts. As I began interacting with the restaurant's staff to gain access as an ethnographer, I feared that these restrictions would limit what I was able to learn about the relationship between Greek cuisine and plant-based dietary philosophies. Circumstance was one of the critical limiting factors for my research because many restaurants are too busy or unwilling to allow a graduate student researcher to possibly hinder service performance with interviews and consent forms. Fortunately, the management at Athena was gracious enough to grant me access to their dining areas and the chance to talk to Nick, the restaurant's operations manager who graciously coordinated with me to schedule interview and observation times.

Nick describes himself as a fourth generation Greek-American who grew up in and eventually found his way back to the restaurant business. From his point of view, Greek cuisine is one that prides itself on its historic identity and tradition. Nick disclosed to me that even among Greek-Americans who are several generations separate from Greece itself, there is a strong sense of pride in being Greek, especially regarding the prominent position Greek ideas hold in Western cultures, in traditional practices, and in culinary heritage.

Turning specifically toward Greek attitudes regarding food, Nick emphasized several characteristics that he believes are critical to the cuisine. The first of these is a connection to the physical environment of Greece through traditional ingredients. To him, Greek food must be made from ingredients that, if they are not imported from Greece, are the same as those produced there. He went further by stating that Greek cuisine was, “...*steeped in the resources, and it’s been passed down from generation to generation... Fresh, wholesome ingredients and a lot of spices.*” This importance given to ingredients sets some pretty clear boundaries for what could and could not be considered Greek food, which puts the possibility of subbing non-traditional ingredients in a dish to make it meat free in contentious waters.

Another important characteristic of Greek cuisine, as defined by Nick, is that it must be genuine and authentic. To truly define what these two very loaded and possibly controversial terms mean is beyond the scope of this research, and possibly even an unresolvable paradox. I think what is important, especially for ethnic communities like Greek-Americans, is that the food feels genuine and authentic. It must be similar to the food they grew up with and follow similar, if not the same, recipes that their yiayia used.

The perception of authenticity also extends beyond the Greek-American community. Nick reported that some customers have an “Disneyland” like expectation when they dine at

Athena. They expect the food, the wine, and the waiters to be Greek (in the case of the waiters having a Greek accent and name tag). More than this, there's an element of theater that is performed when the food is served, especially regarding what I dub the "Saganaki ritual" that has become a popular attraction in Greektown restaurants. I witnessed this event several times during my research at Athena, where the server brings out a pan in which sits a Greek-style block of cheese drowned in brandy and subsequently flambées the cheese at the table while shouting "Opa!" before extinguishing the flame with lemon juice. This example of performative food service creates a sense of authenticity for Athena's customers by theatrically acting out a culinary tradition right at their table, regardless of the ritual's actual origins (Zeldes, 2002). In restaurant environments such as Athena, there is a firm expectation that the food accurately tastes of and represents Greek traditional cuisine. Due to this expectation, cooks at Greek restaurants must navigate the pressures of culinary tradition when creating a menu that caters to plant-based customers.

This leads me into what I learned from Nick about how Athena approaches serving vegetarian and vegan offerings to its diners. Initially, he explained to me how important preparing different ingredients is to the kitchen staff for the customer's meals to come out in a timely manner. During initial preparation and when a dish is ordered, Nick emphasized how their kitchen staff makes a key effort to separate the meatless dishes from those that contain animal products. He also expressed that at Athena, they are willing to make last minute modifications to a dish to meet the dietary restrictions of a specific customer. Regarding making sure a dish can accommodate a customer who follows a plant-based dietary philosophy Nick said, "*you have to be adaptive and creative. You also have to provide a lot of options. It can't just be 'vegetarian options #1 and #2'*". At first glance, this seems to be in contrast toward the significance given to

genuineness and authenticity in Greek cuisine. It also puts more strain on a restaurant to provide plant-based menu options if many traditional dishes contain meat. Nevertheless, the issue of adaptation is met with a solution to balance out the dissonance between authentic and creative, by highlighting option variety. Not only do more options make the menu more appealing to vegetarian and vegan customers, they allow for different aspects of Greek culinary heritage to shine.

Nick explained that some of the meatless and plant-based options offered at Athena can trace their origin to traditional fasting for Orthodox holidays and the economic limitations of procuring meat products pre-industrialization. For example, we can examine two similar dishes that are on Athena's menu; mousakas and "vegetarian mousakas". These dishes are essentially identical, more so than in name, as they are layers of eggplant, zucchini, tomato sauce, and potatoes that are topped with a béchamel sauce, but the mousaka listed under "Traditional Greek" on the menu also includes ground beef. Nick explained that both the beefy and beef-less versions of the dish are common in Greece and in Greek-American households. While they are both considered mousaka, the meatless version is typically served during religious fasting or when meat is not readily attainable. "Vegetarian mousaka" thereby, becomes a dish became associated with fasting or hard-times while the "Traditional Greek" mousaka is more complete, the dish craved when one was celebrating or prosperous. Athena removes meatless mousaka from this cultural context and reframes it under the brand of being specifically vegetarian to communicate that this version of this dish is available for vegetarians. Dishes like *gemista* (stuffed red bell pepper) undergo a similar conceptual transformation on Athena's menu while others, such as spanakopita, were meatless in the first place but the quantity has been modified so it can be offered as an entree. Similar to what Pedro expressed regarding Mexican cuisine, there

are certain core elements to Greek cuisine that allow creative cooks to find a balance between presenting food that the public will consider authentic and can also be served to those who abstain from animal products. The solution is not necessarily to use meat substitutes in the modern sense of the term, but to sometimes remember how foods were traditionally constructed to be filling and nutritious in the absence of meat. Here we can see the alternative, or arguably the original strategy for adapting regional/ethnic dishes to plant-based diets, by referring to another branch of the culinary tradition.



Choose Three Meze: Hummus, tzatziki, and melitzanosalata. Topped with olives and served with pita. Courtesy of Athena Greek Restaurant. Photograph by Hayden Bidinger, 2024.

### **Similarities and Differences**

In order to synthesize what can be gleaned from my fieldwork, I believe it is important to compare and contrast how Taqueria Varitas and Athena approach the predicament of accommodating plant-based customers. Overall, there are notable overlaps in their strategies. Both Pedro and Nick emphasized the implementation of extant traditional recipes that do not contain any meat so that they could provide quality vegetarian and vegan options. These options

demonstrate the adaptive avenue of rebranding traditional dishes as meatless, or as vegetarian or vegan, in the context of contemporary American dietary philosophies. This contextual and conceptual shift as a response to plant-based demand is deemed possible due to what are perceived to be plant-based cores present in Mexican/Mexican-American and Greek/Greek-American cuisine. By this I mean that both Pedro and Nick placed emphasis on the plant-based ingredients that make up main elements and flavors for their respective cuisine. For example, onion, tomato, chilis, cilantro, and avocado were highlighted by Pedro and Alejandra as being some of the shining flavor components of Mexican food while Nick emphasized fresh herbs, spices, vegetables, and (in the case of vegetarians) cheese being essential to the taste of Greek food. At a symbolic level, a dish can still be perceived as complete within these two cuisines even if it lacks animal products. This retained symbolism appears to support Gvion-Roseberg's claim that foods can retain their value despite becoming meatless, yet the change in symbolic value occurred before they were reconceptualized as vegetarian or vegan (1990). Initially, they were viewed as what a family could afford or what they had to eat because it was Lent.

Furthermore, it was suggested by all of my participants that these plant-based traditional dishes originate in historical, political-economic contexts that render them already authentic in various ways. Specifically, the cost of meat, when compared to the expense of plant-based ingredients, meant that families in both cultural areas might routinely cook without animal products. Socioeconomic status then contributes cross-culturally to the complex ways food signifies identity as a marker of cultural identity (Timothy and Ron, 2013).

Another similarity in approach to serving customers who follow plant-based dietary philosophies can be seen in the presentation of a variety of meatless menu options. In the case of

Taqueria Varitas, customers pick whichever plant-based protein sounds most appealing and remove any dairy ingredient if they so wish. On the other hand, Athena gives its plant-based customers a variety of different options, through multiple meal course categories, while also being open to impromptu modification where possible. Both of these approaches build on the preexisting framework of the plant-based core by keeping the traditional structure of dishes intact but allowing for modification and variety.

The significance of modification and variety brings me to the next similarity between the two restaurants' approaches to serving plant-based food, innovation, and adaptation where necessary. Despite also keeping to traditional ingredients and dishes, both Taqueria Varitas and Athena emphasized creativity when including plant-based options on their menus. This creativity was expressed at Taqueria Varitas by using new ingredients, like tofu and soy steak, in the framework of a traditional dish. Furthermore, Pedro shared that he would experiment with recipes and ingredients so he could create tasty renditions of traditional Mexican food but with a plant-based protein. In the case of Athena, creativity is necessary to select the plant-based menu options. As Nick expressed, he believes it is the job of a restaurant to provide ample plant-based options to its customers. This allows for restaurant staff to creatively incorporate traditional plant-based dishes in order to provide multiple options and variety among these options. Yet, while there is a similarity regarding the importance of innovation and creativity in the kitchen, the restaurants take different stances on how these concepts are expressed.

The use of non-traditional ingredients, such as tofu and soy steak, at Taqueria Varitas contrasts to Athena's strict adherence to ingredients commonly found in Greek cuisine. The former's approach to balancing out the demands of authenticity and plant-based customers focuses more on recipe adaptation. That is, adapting the preparation of tacos, tortas, and burritos,



among others, with the inclusion of non-Mexican meat-substitutes. While many ingredients remain consistent, like topping a taco with cilantro, lettuce, tomato, and onion, and the base sauces are initially plant-based, Taqueria Varitas is more open to experimenting with ingredients that are not part of the owner's culinary heritage. Athena balances authenticity and plant-based demand without the implementation of meat-substitutes that come from outside the cuisine. Instead, they either remove the animal element, like in the case of their vegetarian mousaka, or rely entirely on meat being absent from the dish originally, such as spanakopita. The rejection of non-traditional meat-substitutes might stem from the beliefs of Athena's lofty expectations of their customers of what is authentically Greek and the food ethos of their staff.

### **Perspectives**

It is inside of the culinary ethos of those who work in ethnic/regionally oriented restaurants that I wish to explore next. Specifically, how people like Alejandra, Pedro, and Nick perceive the increasing popularity of plant-based dietary philosophies and how this affects the culinary heritage of their respective communities. During my interviews, I asked questions regarding what opinions the interviewee held about plant-based dietary philosophies and those who practice them. Overall, there were no negative attitudes about vegetarianism or veganism, nor their advocates. The most damning opinion about plant-based customers that was expressed to me was that the more militant followers could be a bit preachy or overbearing when it came to service interactions, but just in a different way than a restaurant's usual poorly behaved patron. Among those interviewed, there was a generally held belief that plant-based diets were a healthy alternative to the meat-heavy meal practices of the modern world. Alejandra and Pedro used terms like "*nutritious*", while Nick referred to them as "*lighter*". All of those I spoke to over the

course of my fieldwork seemed genuinely happy to provide options for plant-based customers. It was viewed mostly as a means to access a greater customer pool and ensure happier diners.

I also probed my interviewees about how other people with whom they shared a similar ethnic background viewed the plant-based menu options. Alejandra and Pedro stated that other community members seemed ambivalent about plant-based options, given they still had access to delicious renditions of their favorite meat-based dishes. Nick's response to this line of questioning yielded a similarly held belief among Greeks and Greek-Americans. Plant-based dietary philosophies are seen as non-threatening to Greek cuisine and identity, given food's adhesive nature are part of cultural identity (Suhaimi and Zahari, 2015). As a matter of fact, they are simply another option that allows more people to experience Greek culture. Nick went on to say that if Greeks "... *see non-Greeks enjoying certain foods [Greek cuisine], they definitely like that. It gives them a sense of pride because 'our food is the best'*"! Therefore, based on the positive attitudes toward plant-based dietary philosophies expressed by my interviewees and the lack of sense of impending cultural doom expressed by their respective communities, it would appear that plant-based diets are not seen to be threatening to the culinary heritages of ethnic communities.

It at least appears this way at first glance if not for several limiting factors that could cause potential conflict between what ethnic/regional communities define as "traditional" and plant-based dietary philosophies. One of the details I noticed from my fieldwork and interviews, specifically about how the Mexican and Greek communities in Chicago react to seeing plant-based options on the menu, is that they are supportive or indifferent to the presence of these options so long as they do not interfere with their enjoyment of traditional dishes that include meat.

There is a hypothetical line in the sand that kept reappearing, a line drawn by notions of authenticity. During my conversations with Alejandra and Pedro, we went on a bit of a detour theorizing about this imaginary barrier. “*When does a taco stop being a taco*”? Tacos are excellent from a restaurant business standpoint. They’re easy to make, familiar to many Americans, and it’s a dish format that inspires the self-expression of the cook and customization on part of the customer. This has led, according to Alejandra and Pedro, to the mass proliferation of tacos on restaurant menus across the country even if it is the only dish that slightly resembles Mexican cuisine they offer. Not only has the taco found its way outside of traditional Mexican cuisine, but many chefs have put their own spin on it. Bulgogi, Báhn mì, falafel, jalfrezi, and shrimp Po’ Boy tacos are but a few fusion variations I have personally seen on restaurant menus. Sure they might adhere to the essential format of taco construction, but Alejandra and Pedro believe that they no longer resemble what they would desire when in the mood for tacos and are by no means authentic. Referring once again to Gvion-Rosenberg’s claim that adapted meatless dishes maintain their symbolic value, here we see the contrary (1990). Although not specifically meatless, the aforementioned line in the sand appears to govern what is or is not a taco.

Nick and I also spoke about the phenomenon of food not feeling traditional once it has gone through significant deviation. For example, Nick described his reaction to seeing “deconstructed pastitsio” on a modern, high-end restaurant menu, “*It’s not pastitsio. It’s noodles, cream sauce, and ground beef... some might say it’s creative, I would say it’s almost insulting*”. This bold statement clarifies the sentiment that there is a point where a traditional dish becomes unfamiliar to those who are culturally attached to it. In this case, deconstructing a dish into its essential components displaces it from its cultural and emotional context. If one was craving pastitsio, they would be dissatisfied to be served a dish that was deconstructed past the point of

recognition. Furthermore, since according to Hashimoto and Telfer, food is so closely tied to identity, negative reactions to culinary experiments on traditional dishes are understandable (2015).

Regarding how plant-based alterations may play into this conversion from culinary convention, how do ethnic communities react to the upstaging of traditionally meat-based dishes by plant-based versions? Especially in the case of Greek/Greek-American cuisine, how would the diners at Athena react if they started serving souvlaki made with a soy or vital wheat gluten derived meat substitute with dairy-free tzatziki? Would it really be souvlaki or just a vapid imitation? As Byrd claims, tradition and ingredients are critical tools that restaurants use to convey authenticity to their customers (2017). If the demand for plant-based menu options continues to grow, many individuals and communities who define part of their identity through their traditional food could react to meat-free adaptations of their most nostalgic dish similarly to deconstructed pastitio or an “Aloo Gobi taco” served in a lettuce wrap.

This broader examination of a community’s perspectives on plant-based changes to traditional recipes requires a larger sample size which places it outside of the limitation of this study. I believe that future, larger-scale research concerning the reactions of ethnic communities to how plant-based diets are changing their culinary heritage is needed to be fully examined. Lines of questioning such as these seem irrelevant if we choose only to examine Athena’s approach of serving plant-based menu options only composed of traditional ingredients, but what about Taqueria Varitas’ approach? The aforementioned line in the sand becomes more hard to discern because even though their tofu and soy steak tacos are prepared conventionally, the ingredients are not of Mexican origin. I am not sure there is a satisfying answer to this. It comes down to personal opinion and community attitudes as a whole. This study opens the door for

future research to explore deeper into the developing relationship between regional/ethnic cuisines and plant-based dietary philosophies.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this paper, I have endeavored to explore how regional/ethnic cuisines have faced the challenge of adapting culinary tradition, convention, and their perspectives to plant-based dietary philosophies. This study serves as valuable insight not only into how plant-based dietary philosophies are influencing regional/ethnic cuisine but also how wider American food culture affects culturally situated culinary conventions.

Due to historical conditions and regional ingredients, many cuisines such as Mexican and Greek possess plant-based core elements. These elements come from the ingredients indigenous to the cuisine's original environment, particularly vegetables, fruits, grains, herbs, and spices, that make up many of the essential structural and flavor components of traditional dishes. Food sits at the crossroads between environmental, behavioral, and cultural influences that affect cultural characteristics. It is from this nexus that a dish comes to be and, in many cases, finds itself transported to an alien setting such as the United States. Once here, the people who have brought with them their traditions, beliefs, and values surrounding food try to make do despite limited resources and outside sociocultural pressures (Frost and Liang, 2015).

Here the balancing act begins between staying true to the food of one's culture and adapting to a different biological and cultural arena. The increasing prevalence of plant-based dietary philosophies is part of these cultural forces that have shaped and are currently shaped how ethnic communities are adapting to different circumstances. Based on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, the representatives of regional/ethnic cuisine, i.e. restaurants who

specialize in them, are engaged in a difficult balancing act between successfully catering to plant-based dietary philosophies and remaining true to notions of culinary authenticity, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of their patrons. This balancing act can be expressed through multiple routes of cuisine adaptation. The most basic route is the alteration of kitchen organization to decrease the likelihood of cross-contamination between meat and meatless ingredients. This can be seen in Pedro's reorganization of his fillings line and the separate preparation employed by the chefs at Athena.

Then comes a critical fork in the road, whether or not a chef will incorporate non-traditional ingredients or adhere strictly to the plant-based core. Taqueria Varitas straddles the line of authenticity expectations by preparing vegan sauces and molés and cooking plant-based meat substitutes in a traditional fashion. Athena chooses to stick to entirely traditional ingredients but draws on the meatless branches of its culinary heritage. Both restaurants prioritize variety, customization, and accommodation in order to allow a greater feeling of choice to their customers. Furthermore, they also champion their menu construction and the creativity of their chefs to compose their menus.

From the point of view of restaurant staff interviewed in this research, catering to plant-based customers is not an insurmountable challenge but presents an important quandary. There is a general preconception of plant-based diets as being a healthier alternative to meat consumption and a general attitude of respect for their customers' wishes. While I was not informed about any explicit tension felt by members of Chicago's Mexican and Greek communities, there is concern with dishes straying too far from tradition. Given the substitution of ingredients and the increasing presence of meat-substitutes, as these substitutes become more common and economical, many members of ethnic communities might find themselves

distanced from their culinary conventions when they see meat-alternative options on the menu at their favorite restaurant.

Due to the time limitations in the program for which this study was conducted, I was only able to work with two restaurants. This is a small sampling of any city's restaurant scene, nonetheless the scene of a city as large and as diverse as Chicago. As a graduate student ethnographer, I was limited by time, travel, and the financial expenses that are inherent to this type of anthropological research. As plant-based dietary philosophies continue to gain cultural traction in the U.S., it will become more important to understand how pre-established cuisines react and understand the country's changing diets. Future studies should seek to conduct ethnographic research at a larger sample of restaurants that represent a wider variety of regional/ethnic cuisines. Although I was only able to contribute the first few steps in examining regional/ethnic cuisines in a multiethnic study, I strongly encourage other researchers to answer Ray's call for greater analysis (2007). Furthermore, studies should extend to other metropolitan areas within the U.S. and cooperate with researchers who study the cultural ramifications of plant-based dietary philosophies across the globe. There is already an established train of thought examining plant-based diets in differing cultural contexts, as seen in Altaş and Cao, and future research must seek to contribute to this literature and connect recurring themes internationally (2017, 2018).

Nevertheless, I believe that there is a bright future to be shared between regional/ethnic cuisines and plant-based dietary philosophies. For Mexican and Greek restaurants, the established cuisine and creativity of cooks creates an open and positive pursuit of creating menus that cater to vegetarians and vegans. As Ryang highlights, cuisines are in flux, therefore only time can tell how ethnic communities choose to integrate or reject plant-based alterations to

culinary tradition (2015). It boils down to respect, as long as the meat-eaters can get their fix and vegetarians and vegans are accommodated with sufficient options, and both still are perceived as authentic, then all can enjoy a good meal and the beauty of culture's expression through food.



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