"Oh, you're an Arab - I love hummus!" *Mezze*: Cultural Dialogue Appetizers

Heba El Attar

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Modern Languages,
Cleveland State University, U.S.A.

Abstract

Even with the resurgence of anti-Arab/Middle Eastern anxiety following 9/11, the US public's appreciation of Arab and Middle Eastern food remained strong. This essay explores the dimensions and implications of the rising US consumers' familiarity with and consumption of Middle Eastern food, and contextualizes it within the framework of Middle Eastern immigrants' culinary cultural performance in the Americas. It starts by discussing the significance of Middle Eastern gastronomy, its history in the New World, and then focuses on *mezze* (appetizers) as one of the most widely consumed Middle Eastern dishes, especially in the US. The essay concludes by discussing the integration of this gastronomy in Middle East-related courses, and its potential in launching a new cultural dialogue between the US mainstream and the Middle Eastern/Arab 'other.'

Introduction

Dean Obeidallah, in an interview with Weaver, mimicked mainstream Americans response upon finding out he is Arab-American :

> 'Oh, you're Arab-I love ḥummus.'...' Oh, you're Arab, what a coincidence, I love Indian food.'...' Oh, you're Arab, no, really, what are you?'...'Oh, you're Arab, hey, don't take this the wrong way, but if you hear of any terrorist attacks coming up, will you warn me?'...'I'm just kidding - but seriously, if you do hear of something, you will let me know, right?' (qtd. In Weaver 2006).

Certainly, his imitation covers the range of prejudicial perceptions held by the American public in regards to Arabs and Middle Easterners. First, in terms of the correlated ethnic food (e.g., *ḥummus*); by picturing that food and therefore the person within the realm of the ''Orient'', however far off the mark that might be; by denying the possibility of any positive feature in an Arab or someone of Middle Eastern descent; and lastly by perceiving the latter as necessarily terrorism related. And regardless of their simplistic or prejudicial nature, these perceptions, which grew stronger in the wake of 9/11, were revealing in that they identified a fundamental lack of knowledge about that 'other'. Hence, a pressing national need arose to establish a new cultural dialogue with that 'other' and to train professionals in the appropriate cultural and linguistic proficiency levels in Middle Eastern languages and cultures.

Many American universities responded by either starting or increasing their incorporation of Middle East-related courses or establishing new minors and majors in Middle Eastern and Arabic studies. However, most of them faced a challenge finding professors when it came to the overall limited number of available instructors in the field versus the steadily growing demand for teachers of those languages and cultures. Unable to recruit enough appropriate instructors, many universities failed to establish a coherent curriculum in the area, and ended up offering only a few Middle East-related courses. This failure has the potential to undermine even the most dedicated students' learning efforts - it is hard to teach and to learn the truth of the Middle East as a broad multiethnic and polyglot geographical region encompassing extensive and intertwined histories and cultures with only a few scattered courses in the area. Also, it is a failure that frequently results in leaving unchallenged the simplistic depictions spread among US mainstream culture regarding the Middle East, and perpetuates distanced and othering positions among learners by diminishing the likelihood of any cultural encounter or dialogue with that 'other.'

In the face of these challenges, instructors of Middle East-related

courses have been pressed to find highly communicative teaching strategies that can deliver that ultimate learning outcome; beginning a dialogue with the 'other'. In this sense, food stands out as a powerful teaching/learning tool especially if culinary culture is viewed as a strategy to enculturate students regarding their own identity as well as about alterity (Long 235-42), and to provide them with conceptualizations of the world (Counihan 114). In particular, Middle Eastern and Arab food *per se* entails specificity that renders its integration in teaching Middle East-related courses substantial. In addition, as an ethnic food in the US, Middle Eastern gastronomy is intrinsic to the cultural performance of the correlated immigrant collectivities who inevitably integrate this nation's social reality today. In fact, it is worth noting that the rising anti-Middle Eastern (and anti-Arab) sentiments among US citizens in the wake of 9/11 did not affect the consumption of Middle Eastern and Arab food. In fact, perhaps due to the US consumers' openness to food exploration and the availability of most food products in the US market (Martin 2004) Arab and Middle Eastern food has grown in popularity.

Food, Identity, Othering, and Otherness

It could be suggested that the first major specificity to Middle Eastern gastronomy is its role as a signifier for a highly diverse cultural heritage - Iranian, Moroccan, Turkish, etc. - although it is primarily associated with Islamic and Arab identity and civilization (Roden 5, 16-17). As such, Middle Eastern gastronomy overcomes the entanglement of national identities in this complex region for the following reasons:

> [i]n a polyglot region like the Middle East this construction involves disentangling Arab from Turk from Kurd from Persian, and, within the Arab world, the subtle and not so subtle utilization of the pre-Islamic past to construct country histories: Pharaonic Egypt and Babylonic Iraq. Each of these histories then claims as much as is possibly credible of the common Middle Eastern heritage as its own, and heaps the undesirable elements on the other. The supposed corruptions and accretions in Islam were blamed by Arab thinkers on the Turks and Persians; Kurds claimed Saladin (Salah al-Din) as their own; Arabs and Persians disputed the identity of the illustrious scientists and philosophers of Islamic history, and so on. Food comes into these disputations at a less formalized level: it does not rank with the exalted spheres of religion, philosophy and statecraft. It is the frame of mind which claims all good things as 'ours', which operates at various levels to include food. (Zubaida 39).

Thus, this gastronomy is a signifier that displays as much as it breaches

Middle Eastern intricacies such as the inevitable historic and religious heritage of ancient Middle Eastern civilizations; the melting of such heritage into the multicultural Islamized and Arabized pot since the Middle Ages until the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, and the pre-Islamic and Islamized identity negotiation in each of the modern nation states in the region.

Meanwhile, the second major specificity to Middle Eastern gastronomy would be its function as a barometer for what Roden refers to as the war-peace relationship between the West and the Arab/Muslim Middle East, which was basically shaped in the Middle Ages due to the Muslim conquest of Byzantium and Iberia, and the Crusaders multiple campaigns to the Middle East. At that time, says Roden, despite perceiving the Arab Muslim Middle East as an aggressor, the West admired its knowledge, power, and prosperity, thus worked to learn its arts, sciences, agriculture, and sophisticated lifestyles among which there was much related to food. Consequently, Saracen-inspired dishes, argues Roden, were widely co-opted by Western cookery in that period (10). With the rise of European Imperialism in the following centuries, however, the West started to assert its own supremacy by conceptualizing and depicting the Orient in general and the Arab Muslim Middle East in particular in Eurocentric terms. Subsequently, what had previously been considered sophisticated Middle Eastern gastronomy began to be seen as primitive. This sentiment could be inferred from the nineteenth-century Western explorer Charles Montagu Doughty's reaction to Arabian food, which he perceived merely as ''lambs sitting on mountains of rice in a sea of fat'' (qtd. in Roden 9).

A third specificity to Middle Eastern gastronomy would be the fact that, even in the twentieth century, it kept reflecting the fluctuating relationship between the East and the West as affected by ongoing political instability in the Middle East, which drove many of its inhabitants to migrate to Europe or the Americas (Roden 9). In the new host societies, these immigrants found in their culinary culture a voice to assert their cultural heritage and express assimilation to the new milieu. Performing Middle Eastern culinary culture then became their counter self-representation tool to overcome their 'otherness.'

Middle Eastern Food in the Americas

Since the nineteenth century, says Martin, Middle Eastern food companies started to target early Arab and Middle Eastern immigrants in North America, exporting all sorts of goods including ''barrels of water'' from River Jordan-Holy Land to use alternately as a curative and in the Christian religious ceremony of baptism. Today, he adds, these companies are pursuing the

broader US mainstream consumers by Americanizing their products' labeling (e.g., calling the *falafel* ''crunch patties''). According to Martin, they have even started to target the large Hispanic market in the US, hence an increase in the visibility of Arab culinary culture across the States.

Meanwhile, argues Martin, Arab immigrants in North America were always eager to perform their culture through food, especially in restaurants. This was the case, he explains, of Egyptian and Ottoman restaurants during the American Centennial Exhibition of 1876. In fact, Lockwood and Lockwood indicate that it is primarily in these restaurants that non-Arab Americans find a blending of different Arab national culinary traditions, frequently with Lebanese dishes at the core of the menus (524). They also suggest that, besides these restaurants, Middle Eastern and Arab grocery stores would be the second place where non-Arab Americans might come across Arab food and food-ways. This is the case, they explain, in Detroit where Arab grocers and pastry shops serve a clientele other than Arab immigrants for ''[m]any Greeks, Yugoslavs, Albanians, Romanians, Pakistanis, Indians, Jews, and especially Armenians find at least part of what they need to maintain their own culinary traditions in Arab markets'' (522). Lockwood and Lockwood also point to a third possible exposure of non-Arab Americans to Arab and Middle Eastern culinary culture, which can likely take place in populations with a considerable ratio of Arab immigrants. Neighborliness, they say, allows an informal and friendly food exchange between Arabs and non-Arabs in neighborhoods or at the workplace. And in this respect, they highlight that an ''Italian/Polish American has built a close friendship with her Lebanese neighbor over coffee and Lebanese pastries during mid-morning visits'' (532), which indicates how such food exchange generates new cultural encounters and enhances inter-ethnic relations.

In Latin America, Middle Eastern and Arab collectivities were (are) equally eager to perform their culinary culture. For instance, in one of her works, Arab-Colombian storyteller and novelist Soad Lakah remembers that her father once angrily shouted at a Colombian kid who mistook the bread prepared by the Arab community in Colombia for being simply and plainly Ottoman, ''These are not Turkish cookies, damn it! This is Arab bread.''[1] Outraged, her father felt the need to assert the distinction between the different identities signified by the bread, thus he added, ''[We] are Arabs, descendents of Semites and Phoenicians.''[2] Obviously, that kid or any other native Colombian who heard the shouting might not have understood his anger over the bread prepared by the Arab immigrants who first entered Latin American countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with Turkish passports. Nonetheless, for Lakah's father the bread signified that the

Arabized Middle East only became part of the Turkish/Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century. For the Turk immigrants who originally came from Asia to settle in Anatolia, their rule was basically perceived as alien to the region. And although the Turkish cuisine later became one of the four most important cuisines in the Middle East (Roden 16), it would still be considered recent compared to other Middle Eastern cuisines deeply rooted in the region's history such as the Levantine with its Phoenician heritage - that is, the one that Lakah's father vindicated.

In any case, as had their counterparts in North America, Arab and Middle Eastern immigrants in Latin America established public places for social gathering and entertainment, which must have included restaurants to serve their cuisines. And it seems that their engagement in the textile trade with the Middle East enabled them to import original ingredients from the homeland. Additionally, like their counterparts in the north, they promoted chickpea purée and variants of eggplant dishes. Nevertheless, a significant difference between them and those in the north would be that dishes of Arab and/or Middle Eastern origin were not merely consumed by Latin Americans but rather co-opted by national cuisines across the continent. As one Mexican chef acknowledges, the history of Arab and Middle East culinary culture in Latin America transcends the nineteenth-century migrations from the Middle East, and could be traced back to the fertile interculturalism in al-Andalus - that is, medieval Iberia:

> The Arab legacy that reached America through Spain had a special impact on cookery. By the time it arrived to the New World, the Spanish cuisine of the sixteenth century was already a culinary mosaic molded by the old hunting and the roast of aboriginal Iberians, the Roman wheat bread, grapes, olives and garlic, the medieval flavor and spices, and the influence of those whose land extends across North Africa and the Middle East: the Arab world (Fournier).

Mezze: Between the Old and New Worlds

When mocking the American stereotyping of Arabs, Dean Obeidallah asserts the most basic assumption when he exclaims ''Oh, you're an Arab-I love ḫummus!''(Weaver 2006). The US public does not just consume Middle Eastern food, but rather, as denotes Lockwood and Lockwood, it specifically identifies certain dishes ''as Arab food'' (524). Many of these dishes are part of the *mezze* (also spelled *mazza*) - that is, an assortment of appetizers usually ''consumed in both Arab American restaurants and homes'' (528), among which the most famous are the *ḫummus* and *baba ghannouj.* These

are two dishes basically prepared with *tahini* (sesame paste): mixed with mashed chickpeas, the *tahini* forms *ḫummus*, while it becomes *baba ghannouj* if mixed with eggplant.

According to Roden, *mezze* has a long tradition in the Middle East.. At one point in Istanbul alone, explains Roden, there were more than two hundred types of *mezze* prepared in the Sultan's palace to be served with liquors and food. Meanwhile, she adds, each Middle Eastern country developed its *mezze* specialty. However, Roden clarifies that the most famous *mezze* known today in the West are basically those ''born in the mountain resorts in the Lebanon, where arak is produced, and in the old-style meyhane - the taverns or drinking houses of Istanbul'' (54).

Not only are there numerous variants of *mezze,* but its significance also drastically changes within each of the Middle Eastern countries according to the ethnic group and social strata. For instance, recalling her family's days in Cairo during the 40s and 50s of the twentieth century, Roden's says the following:

> When my father came home from work, all the family settled in the large balcony and waited for Awad the cook to bring in the drinks tray. There was arak or whisky or beer and an assortment of little bites -pieces of cheese or botarga, salted almonds, olives, pickled turnips, sticks of cucumber, radishes. At the risk of spoiling our appetite, we wolfed down the food as we watched the feluccas gliding slowly by on the Nile and listened to my father's account of his day in the Mouski. When we had guests the array of usually elaborate delicacies that was served as mezze could be extraordinary. There were grape leaves and a variety of stuffed vegetables, fillo cheese cigars and meat triangles, little fish balls, meatballs, fried eggplant, vegetable omelets cut into squares, and all kinds of dips and salads. In the kebab houses and the cafés by the Nile, the menu had a standard list of mezze always the same and not very long. It included ḫummus and taḫina, eggplant purees, falafel, and grape leaves (54).

The abundant *mezze* delicacies mentioned in this paragraph reveals Roden's family's social class. As could be inferred, her father was a wealthy man who worked in the Mouski, a thriving trade district located at the heart of Cairo, owned a home in a rich elegant neighborhood overlooking the Nile, and had servants for his family and guests during the social gatherings he seemed to have had frequently. Those delicacies also shed light on her family's ethnic background for they were one among many other Jewish families living in Cairo at the time, some of whom were indigenous, while others, recalls

Roden, were ‘‘from North Africa, Iraq, and Iran’’(5). In fact, the memory of *mezze* delicacies not only marks Roden’s fascination with Middle Eastern food, but rather her nostalgia for the old days in Cairo, more specifically for her multicultural Middle Eastern roots. Although she says that her family and community ‘‘were very Europeanized,’’ her ancestors ‘‘had lived, for hundred years, an integrated life in the Arab and Ottoman worlds.’’ Consequently, she mentions that when she is asked why a Jewish woman like her would be fascinated by Arab food and Islamic civilization, she would assert that ‘‘it was also ours (with some differences) and we were part of it’’ (5).

Mezze delicacies inform about other minorities in the Middle East as well for they were served with food and alcohol among many other ‘‘established communities of Armenians, Greeks, Italians, Syrians and Lebanese’’ (Roden 5) who populated Egypt, especially in the first half of the twentieth century. Armenians, Greeks, Syrians, and Lebanese had been fleeing their homelands from the wars with the Turks since the nineteenth century, and the majority of them were Christian Orthodox or Maronites. Nonetheless, among the dominant group, the mainstream Muslims, *mezze* unmasks social taboos and gender politics. For instance, in his discussion of culinary codes as depicted in the trilogy by Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfuz, Hafez indicates that ‘‘[e]ach appetizer can be eaten separately at home without bringing in the association with alcoholic drinks. But when served together, they move from the realm of ordinary to that of the taboo’’ (268). Hafez then emphasizes how the Egyptian novelist associates between *mazza (mezze),* alcohol consumption, and ensuing sexual activities as ‘‘violation of the religious and social taboos’’ (272). Furthermore, it could be inferred from the example of Mahfuz’ trilogy brought up by Hafez that *mezze*, associated with drinking rituals and extra-marital affairs, is also primarily consumed by men. And according to the trilogy, only women portrayed as whores would consume mezze, drink alcohol, and engage in sex, whereas housewives and daughters are confined to the home where they can eat some appetizers (e.g. pickles), but the latter can never be designated with the word *mezze*.

Apart from communicating the deep social complexity and ethnic and religious diversity within the broader culturally Islamized pot, *mezze* ingredients themselves such as chickpeas (necessary for *ḥummus*) or eggplant (required for *baba ghannouj*) communicate other fundamental aspects of the Middle East such as border crossing, interculturalism, and cultural resistance. Chickpeas, for instance, were among the earliest cereals cultivated by Middle Eastern civilizations, before they were transferred through Carthage to the Iberian Peninsula (Spano Giammellaro 56). Their history is representative of the Middle East as the cradle of the first agriculture revolution where early

human groups developed into sedentary societies in the Ancient Middle East thanks to the agriculture that was favored by the climate and water sources mainly in Mesopotamia, Egypt and Persia.

Unlike chickpeas, which originated in the core Middle East, eggplants were brought from Asia by Muslim conquerors to North Africa then to the Iberian Peninsula where, according to Robsenberger, they later became known as *berenjena*, a Spanish word originally derived from the Arabic word *badindjan* (217). In fact, it could be suggested that their border crossing signifies that the different ancient civilizations of the Middle East have potentially contributed to the advance of agronomy and irrigation techniques, but that it was not until the rise of the Islamic empire with its successive dynasties and its expansion across Asia, North Africa, and Iberia that all the knowledge of the ancient Middle East was brought together to achieve the second agricultural revolution. It was then that all the rich and heterogenic cultures and cuisines of the region were interwoven by the broad cultural unit of Islam spread, initially by Arabs. In addition, it can also be said that their history denotes interculturalism for while that new world power had been Islamizing and Arabizing many territories in varied degrees, the Arabic Islamic culture itself was co-opting the local cultures in the acquired lands. And as eating, cooking and food-ways are one aspect of the culture that is most responsive to new environments (Lockwood and Lockwood 516), the Arab cuisine was adapting to these different socio-cultural settings. Rich in spices, for instance, the Asian and especially the Persian cuisines enriched the Middle Eastern Arab one with flavors and introduced it to new vegetables such as the eggplant.

Particularly in Iberia, eggplants played a substantial role in one of the Middle Eastern, Arabic, and Islamic's most glorious periods in history - that of al-Andalus where Muslims established an independent Islamic Caliphate under the rule of Abdel Rahman III. The new civilization, born in the midst of the European Middle Ages, achieved prosperity in sciences, literature, economy, art, and especially in agriculture, hence the Andalusian school of agronomy that reached its peak between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. García Sánchez argues that the agronomy development in Al-Andalus was manifested in a rich nutritional diet ''contrasting strongly with the invariable poverty of kitchen'' (994) in the rest of Europe at that time. The impact of Middle Eastern gastronomy on local Iberian culture was such that it survived in Peninsular Spanish culinary culture and intertwined with its language before being transferred later to the New World in 1492. Today, stuffed, pickled, or fried eggplants are among the main snacks served in verbenas, or folk feasts, which celebrate Spanishness as a cultural identity that can be traced back not only to the times of Muslim or Roman Iberia, but rather to earlier times when

the Peninsula was conquered and populated by Carthaginians. Nonetheless, the status of eggplants in Spanish cuisine today contrasts drastically with their reputation in the Golden Age. Back then, they were stigmatized for being a food mainly consumed by Moorish and Jews. And such food stigmatizing was part of the forced deculturation of Semites after the fall of Muslim Spain. In this respect, López Baralt writes of how in many Spanish literary works of the time, food was used to encode the identity of each of the characters. In the case of *La Lozana Andaluza*, by the Jewish convert Francisco Delicado, eggplants are mentioned in the text to inform about the real religious and cultural identity of Aldonza Alarosa, an Arabized Jewess. The Moorish stews and eggplant dishes prepared by Aldonza were ‘‘suspicious foods’’ (521-22). And if Aldonza, in Delicado’s work, was cooking Moorish stews and eggplants, then it could be suggested that eggplants, among other Semitic food, signified a resistance by Semitic women in Iberia to the enforced deculturation In fact, this inference can be supported by Perry’s argument about Moorish women, for the latter, says Perry, battled from their homes to preserve their culture by observing religious practices, teaching Arabic language, and preparing Andalusian Arab Islamic gastronomy. ‘‘As Morisco children grew older, they.... quickly became familiar with traditional Muslim foods,’’ (42-43), and ‘‘[e]ven when subjected to arrest, interrogation, imprisonment, and punishment by the Inquisition these women continued to devise strategies of resistance’’ (65). Moreover, if many of those Moorish women, as argues Fadda-Conrey, ‘‘were successful in slipping into the Americas during the Spanish Conquest of the New World’’ (22), then it can be further suggested that many of them kept performing their expertise on Andalusian Arab and Middle Eastern culinary culture in Latin America where eggplants were, probably at the beginning, cooked primarily by them.

Today, in the New World, eggplants and chickpeas, among other vegetables and cereals that originated in the broader Middle East, are intrinsic to the performance of Middle Eastern and Arab ethnic groups who started migrating to the continent at the beginning of the nineteenth century. And like other Middle Eastern food, they were co-opted by some Latin American national cuisines. For instance, in an interview accorded to Chilean-Palestinian newspaper *Al-Damir*, the chef of Presidential cuisine in Chile mentions that he was amazed by the endless number of recipes that Arabs were able to create with eggplants, and that he was eager to ‘‘include it in the menu and prepare it in different ways, even serve it as if it was caviar.’’[3]

Teaching/Learning through Middle Eastern Mezze

In his attempt to identify some of the best learning strategies of Arabic as

Foreign Language, Husseinali insisted on the relevance of guiding students to identify personal values in relation to their learning subject matter (398-401). And as one of these values is dietary habits (Counihan 114), then drawing students' attention to iconic dishes representing any ethnic group can potentially foster cultural dialogues and encounters with that group. With this in mind, I will detail in the following how I integrated food into teaching. I have been personally involved over the past few years in one of the newly established Middle East programs in a Midwest university. I often start my courses by assessing students' familiarity with Middle Eastern and Arabic cultures through class discussions, responses to curricular or extra-curricular activities, or formal surveys. One constant result I received was their initial limited or lack of knowledge about the Middle East save for their familiarity with its gastronomy, especially with *hummus* and *baba ghannouj*. As these are considered simple, economic, and nutritional foodstuffs, US students, many of whom are workers, find these food products both delicious and easy to prepare, *Hummus,* for instance, is considered to be highly nutritious, rich in vitamins, as well as economical. And as mentioned elsewhere in this article, *hummus* became a common dip served in parties, which in fact, states Counihan, abound in college students' life (120).

Encouraged by students' familiarity with some *mezze* dishes, and convinced of their meaningfulness in teaching a wide range of disciplines, I integrated it in several Middle East-related courses ranging from beginning language levels to upper level courses of history, literature, and culture. In doing so, I set two major learning objectives for using *mezze*, or any other Middle Eastern food, in the teaching/learning process. The first is for students to conceptualize the Middle Eastern and Arab cuisine as an essential part of the cultural performance of the Middle Eastern and Arab ethnic groups who are integral to the US social reality today. Subsequently, course activities are usually structured around one of the three venues through which non-Arab/ Middle Eastern Americans get across Arab or Middle Eastern food - that is, as previously mentioned in this essay, restaurants, grocery stores, and neighborliness. Through these activities, students' are encouraged to reflect upon the cultural performance of the ethnic group through its cuisine. With regards to the restaurants, for instance, they are required to analyze whether the business is family run, and the extent of women's participation in it; the restaurant's main specialty (whether it is Turkish, Lebanese, etc.); whether the menu is adapted to the American taste, and which items are integral to their own dietary habits; what characterizes the decoration of the place, etc. When students visit Middle Eastern grocery stores, however, their task becomes that of identifying items they are either familiar with or items cooked

or preserved differently. Sometimes students are required to check the availability of Middle Eastern food items in local American grocery stores. In addition, some co-curricular activities encourage students to interact with any Middle Eastern community available in town, be it in the local mosque or church, or even through student unions on campus, which often exposes them to religious or cultural events (e.g., Muslim, Coptic, Maronite, or Druze feasts, etc.) where Middle Eastern culinary culture is performed. Students are often required to write brief journals on each of these assignments. More importantly, their immersive experiences foster in-class discussions about the target culture and allow them to associate between their findings and the course subject matter. The second learning objective I set for using *mezze* or any other Middle Eastern food in the teaching/learning process is to illustrate the breadth of Middle Eastern history, its multiculturalism, the complexity of its social and religious structures, and the border crossing of its cultures.

It is noteworthy that there are huge Middle Eastern and Arab communities in the Midwest (e.g. Chicago, Dearborn, or Cleveland), which facilitates students' exposure to these ethnic groups' culinary cultural performance. Although these collectivities can now be found across the United States, especially in New York, Florida, and California, their absence in some US towns should not impede regional universities from integrating food in teaching Middle Eastern- and Arabic-related courses. In the case of the latter, for instance, I already found that *mezze's* visibility stands behind its inclusion among the online audiovisual materials related to *Al-Kitāb*, one of the most commonly used Arabic language textbooks across US universities. Realia on *baba ghannouj* or eggplant salad[4] is structured to guide students to practise special sounds in Arabic language, names of different ingredients, measurements, and probably simple food-ways (e.g., *bismAllah* - that is, in the name of God). This material can be used to target higher proficiency levels by asking students to produce, verbally or in writing, simple sentence structures describing the preparation process of any of these appetizers. More importantly, it can be used to enhance the cultural proficiency level by invoking food-related proverbs in Arabic that would familiarize students with some of the basic rituals of social life in the Arab and Middle Eastern worlds for "[t]he famous Arab hospitality has always expressed itself in terms of food and qira al-dayf, nourishing guests, as well as using food and drink to express generosity and other basic sentiments" (Hafez 260). In this context, students may learn expressions such as "aysh wa-milh," which honors the bonds generated between people when they gather to share meals. As a matter of fact, apart from learning the target culture, similar activities encourage students to find similarities between the latter and their own - that is, finding

the ‘‘us’’ in the ‘‘them.’’ This is the case, for instance, with the Arabic proverb ‘‘Cook, servant. Pay up, master,’’ equivalent to the English, ‘‘He who calls the tune must pay the piper.’’

Conclusion

Homi Bhabha argues that ‘‘the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing’’ (Bhabha7). Hence, the rising wave of prejudice against Arab and Middle Easterners in the US after 9/11 can be subverted by engendering a new cultural dialogue between the ‘‘us’’ and ‘‘them.’’ When we take into consideration the growing presence of Middle Easterners in the Americas, which, according to Camarota, in the United States alone ‘‘the number of immigrants from the Middle East has grown more than seven-fold, from fewer than 200,000 in 1970 to nearly 1.5 million in 2000,’’ and that by 2010, ‘‘the total Middle Eastern immigrant population will grow to about 2.5 million.’’ Camarota adds that ‘‘these figures do not include the 570,000 U.S.-born children (under age 18) who have at least one parent born in the Middle East, a number expected to grow to 950,000 by 2010.’’ He also draws attention to the fact that ‘‘many Middle Easterners are well-educated and prosperous.’’ Such visibility, as it could be inferred, contradicts the exotic image frequently spread by the media. It could not be an arbitrary visibility if it is also patterned in Latin America where there are large Middle Eastern communities who are agents in economy and politics. There is a pressing need for a cultural dialogue with these Middle Easterners who are not merely an overseas ‘other’ anymore but rather a part of America’s reality today, for ‘‘[w]hen we talk about our ever-expanding boundaries and territories of the global world, we must not fail to see how our own intimate, indigenous landscapes should be remapped to include those who are its new citizens’’ (Bhabha xxii).

As discussed previously, the appetite for such a cultural dialogue can be triggered through Middle Eastern gastronomy for it is a signifier of identity and alterity as much as of resistance and subversion. It has a communicative potential to inform about basic historic, socio-political, and cultural facts of that region. It specificity stems from its relation to the first agricultural revolution as the basis of ancient civilizations in the region as well as to the second agricultural revolution. The latter was contemporary to the rise of the Islamic empire, which united the ancient civilizations across Africa and Asia, and fostered early globalization of food products. Moreover, its relevance springs from its connectedness to the binary relationship between the West and the East during Medieval times, then its intersection with the New World where, today, it is integral to the performance of the modern Middle Eastern and Arab

immigrant collectivities. Lastly, Middle Eastern gastronomy has the potential to launch such cultural dialogue for it symbolizes a transhistorical continuum (Zubaida and Tapper 7) that can overcome the boundaries of stereotyping and 'othering' regarding the Middle East and Arab worlds.

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ENDNOTES

1 - My translation.

2 - My translation.

3 - My translation from an interview published in the online Palestino-Chilean newspaper *Al-Damir*, *51, March* 2006. Retrieved Jan 29th, 2007 from http://www.palestinos.com/AlDamir/AlDamir_n51-Mar06.pdf

4 - http://www.laits.utexas.edu/aswaat/video_s.php

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