

CHEF DE CUISINE:  
THE LIFE OF A NEW SOUTHERNER BEHIND THE KITCHEN DOOR

Victoria Vasiliki Bouloubasis

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of American Studies and Folklore.

Chapel Hill  
2016

Approved by:

Marcie Cohen Ferris

Sharon P. Holland

Altha J. Cravey

© 2016  
Victoria Vasiliki Bouloubasis  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## **ABSTRACT**

Victoria Vasiliki Bouloubasis: Chef de Cuisine: The Life of a New Southerner Behind  
the Kitchen Door

(Under the direction of Marcie Cohen Ferris)

North Carolina is home to one of the fastest growing Latino populations in the country, faster than any border state. In leading an all-immigrant staff in a fine dining kitchen, on local chef de cuisine deftly navigates the complex dynamics of class, privilege and legal status that play out in a changing South. This thesis unveils a more nuanced perspective of an immigrant restaurant worker through one person's story and the subsequent stories of the people and places from which he came and of who have shared mutual influences. It represents just one life behind the labels thrust upon him and the people and subsequent tropes and stereotypes in which society has him grouped. For many immigrant workers, food may be a tool for economic survival in America, but these skills have limited power. For most, culinary skills will never transform an immigrant outsider into an American citizen-insider. When an immigrant worker is given agency, we can talk about their work in Southern food with the respect and consideration it deserves, understanding its value as an expressive language, as art, as cultural capital and intellectual property.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a first generation college student, achieving this feat means more than I can describe on this page. This work is a result of the support of many people.

I am incredibly grateful to Miguel Torres, who ushered me into his world and allowed me to learn more than I could have imagined. Thank you for opening your heart to this project. Your trust in me to carry your story as far as you needed to take it is sincerely appreciated. Of course, to the entire Torres family in Celaya les doy muchisimas gracias. They made me feel welcome the moment they picked me up at the airport until the very last trip, equipped with recipes and stories. Les agradezco a todos, pero especialmente a Doña Silvia. Me aceptaron como familia en momentos especiales. La experiencia con ustedes me ha cambiado mucho, y les respeto un montón.

A mis “tlacuaches” favoritos: Oscar, Javier, Ramiro, Romeo. Aprendí mucho de ustedes, y más que como hacer una salsa de molcajete. Thank you, amigos.

Special thanks to Gerardo “Tolo” and Flor Martinez in Chapel Hill, and the extended Martinez family in Celaya, especially Petra, Lucia and Pedro. Tolo continues to amaze me with his kindness and conviction, and it was a joy to get to know his family better.

To Bill Smith. My respect for him continues to grow. He is truly a stand-up guy, with a genuine care for his friends in the kitchen and his community. Thank you also to



Bill's friends Luis "Rambo" Ortega, Carlos "Pajarito" Ortega and the entire Ortega family, for showing me another side to Celaya full of Southern slang and chicharron.

To D.L. Anderson and Stacey Sprenz, for offering me the resources and creative brain pickings I needed to feel confident in making media in Mexico. And for believing in stories.

To my tribe in Durham and afar: Zaina Alsous, Areli Barerra de Grodski, Claudia Corletto, Jennifer Delgadillo, Peter Eversoll, Shanthony Exum, Adriana Gallardo, Sarah Garrahan, Archana Gowda, Carla Hutchinson, Samantha Hutchinson-Ouranos, María Itaka, Elly Mandarakas, Thomas Nettesheim, Mandy Padgett, Andrea Patiño Contreras, Mana Reshamwala, José Torres-Don. Their loving support has kept me sane, fed, dancing, inspired and cared for at various points throughout my adult life, and especially in these last two years.

Thank you to Isabel Guzman for providing both legal and humanistic advice and for always supporting my work. To her husband, Alfonso, who has treated me with kindness and looked out for me since I was a 17-year-old freshman, never allowing me to leave Time Out without a honey biscuit.

Thank you to Hannah Gill and Laura Villa Torres for their tremendous support in helping me navigate their research surrounding Celaya and Mexico, which provided a launching pad for my own.

My dream team thesis committee, who all deserve endless jars of cajeta. Altha Cravey, I am so thankful we met. Your admirable work along the border, within our communities at home and your courageous activism on campus give me constant inspiration that I will carry with me in whatever I do. Sharon Holland, your confidence

pushed me to reimagine my work as an academic. Through your guidance, I learned how to embrace intuition. You helped me learn that it counts. Thank you, also, for the nudge and assistance in applying for a grant from the UNC Global Research Institute, which allowed me to continue and extend my work in Celaya with travel funds and a camera. And my advisor, Marcie Cohen Ferris, whose inimitable work lured me here in the first place. I've learned to finally accept the Southern part of my identity thanks to everything you believe in and all you work hard to share with the world. I am always humbled by your eternal, realistic optimism. You have helped me become a better writer, a better teacher and a better listener. I would not have been able to push through so confidently if it weren't for your steady encouragement and sincerity. Thank you.

Most importantly, I thank my family. My sweet younger sister, Elina, who has it all together and insists I'm a cool big sister despite my oft-impractical creative pursuits. To my grandfather, Hercules Amprazis, who survived a civil war to get here. His own immigrant experience in restaurant kitchens led him to witness tremendous moments in civil rights history. Thank you, Παππού, for sharing your stories and for always being proud of me. Lastly, to my parents, Gus and Lisa Bouloubasis. Their unwavering support could never be matched. Neither can the lessons they have taught me: to value hard work and to remain generous. Σας αγαπώ πολύ, Μαμά και Μπαμπά. Lastly, I thank γιαγιά Eleni for being here with me. The birds tell me so. I am forever grateful to have fully experienced your love and strength when I could, to carry with me in my heart, always.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1: CHEF DE CUISINE .....	11
Miguel becomes Mickey.....	17
The emergence of a young man through Latinization of the South.....	21
Journey to chef de cuisine.....	26
“Mickey es el patron”.....	30
CHAPTER 2: THE BIG LEAGUES.....	34
Acquired tastes.....	38
Las Grandes Ligas.....	43
“A gallows humor”.....	48
CHAPTER 3: HOMEMADE MEMORIES.....	53
Celaya Hill.....	56
Dimmed memories.....	61
The uncertainty of a new place.....	66
Confronting emotions.....	68
CHAPTER 4: THE POLITICS OF FEAR AND RACIAL CAPITALISM.....	71
There is no line.....	73
Silence and anonymity.....	74
Perpetual victimhood and racial capitalism.....	78

An evolving fear.....	79
CONCLUSION.....	84
REFERENCES.....	85

## INTRODUCTION

Wearing a white apron over a brown Slow Food Triangle T-shirt is how I usually find chef de cuisine Miguel Torres in the Lantern kitchen in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. It's where he spends his days and nights. Wielding a cleaver, a wok or a clipboard, he commands a staff of more than a dozen cooks and dishwashers in a James Beard award-winning kitchen. In addition to managing all of the back of the house, Miguel decides what recipes to feature on the seasonal menu (an often daily task), places inventory orders from local and regional farmers (as well as for massive amounts of Sriracha sauce and Asian spices), and hires and fires kitchen employees.<sup>1</sup> When someone important comes to town—like venerated New York Times food critic Frank Bruni or famed Southern musician Tift Merritt—Miguel swaps his apron for fancier chef's whites, buttoning the coat up to the collar and preparing for a night of special service. As part of Lantern's conscious effort to connect more personally with diners, Miguel will also cook in front of customers as they mingle in the newly built event space next door—Lantern Table—equipped with a bright, open kitchen poised like a theatre. A giant mirror above his prep table reflects every step of his cooking process; guests marvel at his skilled artistry and gentle nature. Miguel is a public face for Lantern, and, though not as obviously featured as his Southern cohort, he shares the ranks with a slew of chefs lauded

---

<sup>1</sup> Andrea Reusing is still the chef-owner at Lantern, but spent much of 2015 opening her second restaurant at the Durham Hotel in nearby Durham, North Carolina, giving Miguel more responsibility over the inner workings and day-to-day activities at Lantern, including everything that happens during service.

on a national scale for putting this self-proclaimed Southern part of heaven on the culinary map.

But Miguel hasn't seen his family in 18 years. Born in Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico in 1980, he left for Carrboro in 1998—barely an adult. Despite his public role as a top chef in a critically acclaimed restaurant, the media normalizes his presence in our community as a statistic, one of at least eight million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. workforce.<sup>2</sup> After achieving a coveted position within restaurant hierarchy, he still lacks a path to citizenship. Despite decades of effort by immigrants and advocate, such a path for nearly 14 million undocumented residents of the U.S. does not exist. Risking a trip home to visit his family—and then another expensive and dangerous border crossing back—would risk Miguel's entire career.

For many immigrants to the United States, food service becomes a tool for survival in a society—yet it doesn't always make them a part of it. Like many Mexican immigrants to North Carolina, Miguel arrived as a teenager in 1998 and picked up his first American job at a restaurant.<sup>3</sup> But it was at one of the first taquerias in Carrboro in 2001 where Miguel began working a more managerial role. The family owners were also from Miguel's hometown of Celaya, Guanajuato. Soon, to earn more money, he began washing dishes at Elaine's on Franklin, a high-end restaurant in Chapel Hill, a town known for spurring a renaissance of Southern fine dining and the gourmet South.

---

<sup>2</sup> That number highlights what the U.S. Census sets apart as working immigrants. There are an estimated 14 million total undocumented immigrants in the country.

<sup>3</sup> Miguel Torres worked a short stint at a fine-dining restaurant in Chapel Hill named Fusions, which has since closed.

Miguel quickly moved on to full-time prep cook at Elaine's and, after a couple of years, picked up another part-time dishwashing gig at the Lantern just across the street. "I don't like the feeling of being broke," he says of his decision to take on more work.<sup>4</sup> This eventually led to a full-time job at Lantern<sup>5</sup> that paid him more than both jobs combined. Lantern chef-owner Andrea Reusing had met Miguel at the taqueria, where she'd break for lunch and bring food back to her staff during Lantern's early years of operation.

Miguel arrived to the U.S. nearly two decades ago. A determined will plus his deft skills with a sharp knife allowed him to carve out a career and, in turn, a life here in North Carolina. He helped Reusing achieve the coveted culinary honor of Best Chef in the Southeast by the James Beard Foundation in 2011. At that moment, Reusing officially named Miguel the chef de cuisine at Lantern. This is the second highest position in the culinary world, just after head chef.

This thesis unveils a more nuanced perspective of an immigrant restaurant worker through one person's story—Miguel Torres—and the subsequent stories of the people and places from which he came and of who have shared mutual influences. Miguel represents just one life behind the labels thrust upon him and the people and subsequent tropes and stereotypes in which society has him grouped. For many immigrant workers, food may be a tool for economic survival in America, but these skills have limited power. For most, culinary skills will never transform an immigrant outsider into an American citizen-insider. Ethnographer Anne-Marie Fortier considers Italian writer Bruno Bottignolo's concept of the "immigrant condition" and complex reality: "The immigrant

---

<sup>4</sup> Miguel Torres, interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Sept. 10, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Andrea Reusing and her brother, Brendan, opened Lantern opened on West Franklin Street in Chapel Hill in 2002.

is in society, but for society, be it Italian or English, he is lost.” Fortier notes that “wrapped in the languages of deterritorialization, alienation and sacrifice, this ‘condition’ is paradoxically a double source of empowerment and alienation.”<sup>6</sup> This thesis builds on this concept and pushes for more texture and nuance by examining the complex political realities of immigrants in the working food worlds of the American South; to do so, my work focuses on Miguel’s duality as he moves between the work space of ‘fine dining’ in the North Carolina piedmont and his remembered world of home in Mexico. In my nearly 10 years of work as a food journalist, with much research and published work focused on the intersection of food, labor and immigration, I have never met another person in Miguel’s situation to have achieved such a top position, with an enviable tenure at award-winning restaurants. His presence in our food world is a radical act.

Within this work, it is important to note the historical arc of migration in the United States and the labor economies that have so deeply impacted racial and ethnic minorities. A constant flow of immigrants through the global South (the American South included) to the North (or El Norte) reveal how politics and labor—food, factory and agriculture service in particular—have intertwined for the sake of capital. From 1910 through 1970, over 6 million African Americans left the South in what became known as the Great Migration. They were drawn by economic opportunities outside the region and the chance to escape Jim Crow racism and the violence tied to capitalism to create cheap, exploitable labor. This pattern continues to exist with Mexican and other Latino migrants

---

<sup>6</sup> Anne-Marie Fortier, *Migrant Belongings: Memory, Space, Identity*, 2000, 52.



today, many who have fled corrupt governments entangled with American politics. They seek better opportunities—veiled in promise, but with unequal protections and benefit.<sup>7</sup>

Most immigrant men from Mexico who are Miguel's age, including those who work with him in Lantern's kitchen, come to the United States alone to provide for a wife and children they leave behind in their home countries. Miguel is unmarried and identifies as gay. On the surface, he doesn't share an identical family dynamic as his colleagues. Yet, as the oldest son in a single-mother household, he bears the traditional responsibility of providing for his family back home in Mexico, giving his mother and sisters a frequent allowance, enough for them to not work if they choose. I visited his family twice—in the summer and winter of 2015—to better understand the family dynamic of which Miguel sprouted from, and to witness both what he has been able to provide for his family with American work, and what moments and memories have been remembered and lost. "He was my right hand," says his mother Silvia Torres Moreno. "He still is my right hand."<sup>8</sup> Miguel maintains his traditional Mexican and masculine role in earnest, yet his influences both at home and at work derive from a very influential feminine/feminist power. He cites his greatest influences as his mother and Reusing, two women "with strong personalities."<sup>9</sup> Miguel has spent exactly half of his life in North Carolina, all formative years as he grew as an adult and as a chef. Unlike his colleagues, Miguel lives a life fully entrenched in American social behaviors, especially within the worlds of food and food service. Many immigrant kitchen workers risk multiple

---

<sup>7</sup> Parallels may be explored further in a breadth of migration literature, such as *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson (Random House 2010) and *The Maya of Morganton* by Leon Fink (UNC Press 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Originally in Spanish: "Era mi mano derecha. Todavía es mi mano derecha." Silvia Torres, interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico, July 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Miguel Torres in conversation with Victoria Bouloubasis, spring 2015.

dangerous and costly trips across the border to reunite with their families for a year or two and then return for more work. In contrast, Miguel doesn't want to go back to Mexico. "[In the beginning] I felt like I had to make the best of it, and still try to be happy. [But] seeing that I could help my mom and my family, and already doing something that I like—it was a good combination." Chapter One provides a brief history of Miguel's navigation through the food worlds of Chapel Hill and Carrboro and explores his reflection of identity and sense of self as an immigrant chef in the South and as a new southerner. In conversation at the restaurant, Miguel often focuses on the collective talent of Lantern's immigrant staff. He cares deeply about their work and family lives even though his own life is very different. The men are not only bound by their immigrant identities, but also by a world they have inhabited and made malleable by their presence: the Southern food world. Fine dining, to be specific. Chapter Two provides a metaphorical approach to food as a catalyst for class, through the perspective of Miguel and his fellow cooks in comparison to what they have left behind at home. It also explores their team dynamic and Miguel's narrative as a leader in the kitchen, shaping the talents of his cooks who look to him as a teacher. Through the shared experience as undocumented immigrants, Miguel's responsibility for their salaries and work environment has influenced the way Lantern operates its employee structure and ethos.

Miguel wonders his fate here in America. When he thinks of home, he doesn't remember too much. "A lot has changed, I think. It must be different now." He remembers the gorditas, a food he says would be the first thing he'd eat if he went back. He carries vague memories of digging his fingers into wet corn masa in his mother Silvia's kitchen, rolling a ball of it in his hands and clapping it flat against his palms. He

is the oldest of four; she is a single mother. Together, they would make countless gorditas for family celebrations, stuffing them with pulled pork carnitas. They would sell them, too, to earn money that raised a family. In Chapter Three, I attempt to piece together these homemade memories from what I learned staying with the Torres family in Celaya on two separate occasions in 2015. The chapter also briefly traces a legacy of migrant food workers from Celaya to Carrboro and Chapel Hill, and what—and whom—is left out of the local chef hierarchy narrative.

Frequently, Miguel nudges me aside after I speak with one of his staff to elaborate on how they feel about the newest policies put in place by North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory, or by the racist insults made by presidential candidate Donald Trump. When I ask Miguel what the ‘take away’ of this thesis should be, he answers in a way that wraps his own identity into that of his fellow Mexican undocumented immigrants: “I want people to know that we are not criminals.”

We are at a critical time of tension and limbo here in our nation and especially in North Carolina. Though Miguel has spent more than half of his life in the South, he is likely to be viewed as an outsider. This is an idea perpetuated by our laws and a pervasive systemic racism that continues to pit communities against each other based on a resulting societal indoctrination of racism, classism and bigotry. The terminology often used in reference to the human beings who cross our (Southern) border are words like “threat,” “risk to security,” “alien” and “criminal.”<sup>10</sup> These deliberately chosen identifiers within our media, political and legal rhetoric have sensitized a society to think of borders as lines that separate our shared experiences as humans. Our physical borders—between

---

<sup>10</sup> Based on official statements by Immigration, Customs and Enforcement (ICE), the rhetoric of political candidates and personal observation of overheard and witnessed public perception.

states, between North and South, and between El Norte and Mexico—are marred by political tension, war, slavery and the stifling of human rights. Historically, however, these lines have been blurred for economic gain, leading to the migration of Mexicans to work in our food system, especially after the North American Free Trade Agreement. A common concept among immigrant rights activists is the reality that “Money can cross borders. People can’t.” North Carolina’s history of slavery and civil rights tension directly correlates to a thriving agricultural system and domestic labor force. Food is at the center of that, and the purpose of exploring these stories through foodways is to smudge those lines into shared experiences and to draw upon historical records of human perspective to provide clarity on why common tropes and stereotypes permeate the mainstream narrative, and what nuanced perspectives truly exist.

The liberal elite, made up largely of white progressives, assumes its role in this tension complacently, unwilling to step down from what society has set up for them: the upper class. Even if this may not include an upper socioeconomic class, the inherent power structure puts the lived experiences of white progressives at a higher position of privilege. White employers carry an even greater power, then, above their employees, many of whom are undocumented immigrants. Reusing published a recipe credited to Miguel in her 2011 New York Times best-selling cookbook, *Cooking in the Moment: A Year of Seasonal Recipes*. It includes a photo of a younger Miguel smiling at the restaurant. The choice to include this recipe and its meanings of representation, agency and a potential platform for ally-ship will be explored in Chapter Four. The chapter also includes a surveyed perspective of the overarching umbrella of a politics of fear and

power present in North Carolina labor culture as a result of a never-ending stalwart in United States immigration reform policy since the 1980s.

There is a Spanish word that carries a lot of weight: *convivir*. I first learned it while interviewing restaurant worker Nora Mendez in Durham as a journalist.<sup>11</sup> Mendez explained that she maintains composure and pleasant optimism while working long hours for a white boss who is never there because of the *convivir*, the literal “living together” we all share. I cannot recall another person—a native North Carolinian, specifically—to ever express this to me in English, this idea of togetherness and cohabitation, when talking about immigrants and the workers who work for us. There is a discomfort and negotiation expressed in our history, as I will detail in my reflection chapter to conclude my thesis. But through Miguel’s story, the subsequent collected oral histories and a timeline of perspective, we can still move forward acknowledging the past, and vigorously work to fix it as we celebrate our *convivir* of the now.

### **A few notes on style:**

Miguel Torres and all subsequent Torres family members are referred to by their first names to eliminate confusion. Cooks in Lantern’s kitchen are also referred to by their first names; I do not have their or their boss’s explicit permission to use their names for the purpose of this written portion of the thesis.

No Spanish words are italicized or set off by quotations, with the exception of one phrase in italics in Chapter One. (It is embroidered on a jacket.) This deliberate decision is to equalize the languages of Spanish and English.

---

<sup>11</sup> Bouloubasis, Victoria. “Mole and a movie: FARE Project mixes documentaries and food.” *INDY Week*, March 19, 2014

Quotes from interviews in Spanish are written in English, with the original Spanish written in the footnotes.

## CHAPTER 1: Chef de Cuisine

*“To survive the Borderlands  
you must live sin fronteras  
be a crossroads.”*

*- Gloria Anzaldúa*

*“I hope you don’t mind that I said following me around felt like I was on one of those  
trashy reality shows. It’s because I LOVE trashy reality shows.”*

*- Miguel Torres*



*Miguel Torres arranges tomatoes in Lantern’s kitchen. Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Photo by Victoria Bouloubasis (June 2015)*

Lantern's first impression with customers and passersby on Franklin Street is a grand storefront window that gives a generous glimpse into the candle-lit tables and sleek, dreamy atmosphere inside. On display behind the floor-to-ceiling glass, an arrangement of fruit, vegetables and flowers alternate with the seasons. Tomatoes take center stage the moment local farmers have picked their first heirloom harvest. They are nimbly scattered across the windowsill in the bright, seductive hues of summer—deep juicy red, sherbet shades of pink, sunshine yellow and cantaloupe orange. Even a few lumpy, gargantuan ones make the cut, but Miguel saves most of those for the kitchen. In June 2015, I marvel out loud at the beautiful cluster of tomatoes catching the light as the afternoon sun settles onto the restaurant. Miguel proudly shares that he artistically arranges the local, seasonal harvest in the window each week. They are ingredients used on Lantern's menu, which changes nearly every 10 days. "It's also a good way to get the harder ones to ripen," Miguel says of the tomatoes. "We use them all." Fresh tomatoes are his favorite Southern ingredient.

Miguel usually picks up produce for the restaurant from local farmers at the Wednesday Carrboro Farmers Market, after calling them earlier in the week to place a big order. Like most chefs using seasonal ingredients, Andrea and Miguel work first with the abundance of local harvest—or often times its limited supply—before electing to source ingredients from afar. Even then, the outside products are usually ingredients unattainable here, like Alaskan salmon caught fresh the morning it gets shipped to Lantern, at \$26 per pound wholesale.<sup>12</sup> Miguel remembers this ethos in buying local food from growing up in Celaya, where during the 1980s of his childhood, that method of

---

<sup>12</sup> Miguel Torres and Victoria Bouloubasis in conversation, Lantern restaurant kitchen, June 2015.



sourcing food was essentially the only option. In 2011, he told the Southern Foodways Alliance: “I think what people try to do here—going back and go green and buy local food—it’s very common for us to see that where I come from. [...] when you’re a child your mom say, “Can you go and buy a chicken?” You buy a live chicken. And you have to help your mother process it. And it’s a lot of farms, a lot of farms around. So it’s very, very common to do what you guys are trying to do here, of using—not pesticides and all that stuff. For us, it’s very common.”<sup>13</sup> This portion of the interview is included in the featured audio on SFA’s website, and Miguel offers up the memory in a matter-of-fact tone. It is an example of a past that Americans now romanticize with nostalgia and distant memory or, for many of Miguel’s American peer group, no direct memory or connection to it at all. It is important to note that the understanding of local food that Miguel grew up with is something that his youngest sister, Teresa, who was 8 years old when he left, may not remember so well or even have the same connection to as Miguel does. Today, the Torres family in Celaya still sources from both local butcher shops and the fresh food market in the center of the city, but they also purchase packaged goods and imported meats, fruits, vegetables and cheeses from big-box stores and tiendas that sell ingredients grown further from Celaya and its most proximate parameters. (I’ll expand on his family table’s evolution in a more industrialized Celaya in Chapter Three.) From his upbringing in Mexico, Miguel’s already-established relationship to food and connection to growers is an example of how many of the Latino immigrants who arrive to North Carolina already fit into the cultural geography of this state, especially in towns like Chapel Hill and Carrboro that are surrounded by rural areas. Orange County and surrounding counties are

---

<sup>13</sup> Transcript, Andrea Reusing and Miguel Torres Oral History Interview 1, Sept. 7, 2011, by Sara Camp Arnold for the Southern Foodways Alliance

rooted in family farms. A more recent revival of local food appreciation is thus standing on the shoulders of culturally inherited grit. That desire to work the land and produce abundance is more legendary and conscious in this area than it is trendy. The movement itself has spurred into a cohesive pact among farmers and chefs, drawing on the prolific influence of Crook's Corner late founding chef Bill Neal, who, by the late 1980s, was planting the seeds that finally rooted Southern American food as a cuisine worthy of gastronomic praise. Much of that vigor to maintain a local gourmet scene and translate that into a thriving food economy comes from chefs exchanging ideas with farmers and branding that personal interaction on locally sourced menus. Miguel's arrival to Carrboro in 1998 was an almost serendipitous moment that placed a budding culinary professional in the right place at the right time. It was also the perfect time for Andrea Reusing, a young chef herself,<sup>14</sup> to finally open her own restaurant after creating the menu at Raleigh's Enoteca Vin in 1999. *Food & Wine* magazine reported in 2004 that her original menu for Enoteca Vin "challenged the area's predominate steak-and-potatoes mind-set with a small-plates approach and a focus on Asian cuisine and seafood."<sup>15</sup> Miguel recalls first meeting Reusing at his job at Carrboro's La Mercado Central taqueria around 2001. She didn't officially open Lantern with her brother, Brendan Reusing, until 2002. But as they made plans and worked on the building, she'd break for lunch and bring food back to her staff and construction laborers from the taqueria. She would pace the adjacent tienda and pick up various fresh and dried chilies from the produce section, asking about their flavors and how to cook them. Reusing is known for her insatiable curiosity for unique ingredients, simplifying them with a refined gourmet touch. When Lantern

---

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Reusing was born in 1968.

<sup>15</sup> Kate Sekules, "Everybody Loves Vin," *Food & Wine*, October 2004.

opened, Miguel was working across the street at Elaine's on Franklin under chef Brett Jennings. (More on this experience in Chapter Three.)

Under Reusing's guidance, Miguel quickly learned how to source local and rare ingredients for a restaurant kitchen and menu influenced by Asian cuisines. The Lantern soon became wildly popular, earning accolades from noted chefs like Momofuku's David Chang. For the restaurant, this meant pushing out a consistently high volume with consistently high quality products. Miguel frequently echoes a mantra of many chefs: no shortcuts. Folklorist Whitney Brown briefly described Lantern's ethos in her 2010 master's thesis on Carrboro's local food movement:

“For a restaurateur, using local food requires a commitment of time and money, yet many area chefs are doing so successfully and enthusiastically. One of the most famous and mostly vocal local chefs in town decided to bring the comparatively exotic traditions of Asia to Franklin Street using local meat, seafood, and produce. Andrea Reusing, the red-headed, rock-n-rolling mastermind of Lantern restaurant and Slow Food poster chef, was one of the first chefs in the area to publicize her partnerships with local farmers and to hold farm-to-table dinners.” (2010: 73)<sup>16</sup>

As Lantern grew in its mission, Miguel developed his own impressive repertoire in the kitchen. By working under Reusing to enact her vision of a locally sourced, seasonal menu, Miguel expanded on his own limited, adolescent knowledge of local food from a different place and, through his passion and creativity, applied it to a successful business model. He did this as a chef, and as intentionally as someone who owned the restaurant himself. By the middle of 2014, as Reusing prepared to open The Durham, a restaurant in the eponymous nearby city focused on new American cuisine in the freshly constructed, high-end Durham Hotel, Miguel's twelve-year tenure inherited more

---

<sup>16</sup> Whitney Brown, “From cotton mill to co-op: The rise of a local food culture in Carrboro, North Carolina” Master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010

responsibility. By 2015, at the time of my fieldwork, Miguel was running the ship in the kitchen—placing inventory, managing schedules and hiring and firing staff. Each time I visited the kitchen, Miguel told me he was stressed, though he hid it well. He said he met or spoke with Reusing on the phone only about once a week, which was unusual for their close working relationship. By January 2016, he told me he was also in charge of managing the front of the house. Reusing, who still owns the Lantern but spends her days running The Durham, had stopped taking a chef's salary from Lantern and gave Miguel a 20% raise in his own salary for the extra responsibilities. Reusing's trust and value in Miguel is indisputable.

A telling moment of Miguel's increasingly busy and important role at Lantern came after he and I finished eating dinner at nearby Crook's Corner one evening in the fall of 2015. Chef Bill Smith had accompanied us at the bar as we ate—complete with his classic can of Pabst Blue Ribbon in hand. Smith has visited Celaya several times, where his former cook Luis Ortega lives. He jokes he'll retire there, with a tinge of truth. Before we leave dinner, Smith insists that we say hello to the guys in the kitchen. He leads us through the kitchen door, turns to Miguel and says, "I want you to meet Hector. He's my you." Hector Gonzalez, Crook's kitchen manager, and Miguel exchange handshakes and chat while I greet the rest of the cooks on the line, who I have met numerous times. As Miguel and I walk out of the restaurant and down Franklin St., we talk about Smith's undeniable sincerity. Miguel, of course, agrees. But then he turns to me and remarks very seriously: "You know what he said? About Hector being like me, like my job at the Lantern? I know he works hard. But I'm not Andrea's Hector. I don't think people know how much I do."

### **Miguel becomes Mickey**

At the Carrboro market, farmers greet Miguel as Mickey, as does most of the Lantern staff, even the Spanish speakers and Mexican natives. Miguel mingles effortlessly in a bilingual negotiation of space and identity at market. He carries on intimate conversations about vegetables and growing techniques with farmers in English and instructs one of his employees—usually right-hand man Romeo (from Guatemala) or a young dishwasher—in Spanish, on where to find the boxes of produce waiting for them at the farmer’s stand.

There is an obvious representation of the growing demographic of Latinos and immigrants in the South in public places like schools, health clinics and city parks. But the trend is less obvious in places like the Carrboro Farmers Market, where Miguel joins a class of immigrants who are there to represent themselves in ways that are less cultural and more personal. Very few immigrants are represented at participants of a farmer’s market voted one of the best in the country. Cindy Economopoly, who spent her childhood in Greece, sells produce for Eco Farms, a farm she shares with her husband John Soehner. Tri Sa, a Karen refugee from Burma, sells lush bundles of lemongrass, massive gourds, two-feet long beans and piquant plants like ginger and Thai chili pepper. Fitita Slade, a native of Colombia, occasionally appears on Saturdays with her homemade sweets and desserts. These immigrants join a coterie of food artisans and entrepreneurs, chefs and farmers. Miguel clearly feels at home within this group, and is aware that his rapid climb up the culinary hierarchy ladder and mastery of English give him the opportunity to mingle with a very publicly lauded insider’s club.

Anthropologist Hannah Gill has dedicated her career to exploring the narratives and demographic influence of Latinos in North Carolina. She notes in her book, *North Carolina and the Latino Migration Experience: New Roots in the Old North State*, that in three decades, the Latino population in North Carolina grew tremendously, from less than 0.5% to 7.4% (2010: 3).<sup>17</sup> North Carolina is also home to the ninth largest undocumented population in the country (2010: 4)<sup>18</sup>. “In the past three decades, hundreds of thousands of people from Mexico and other Latin American countries have moved to North Carolina as economic, political and environmental refugees, attempting to find jobs and a better life for their families.” (2010: 3)<sup>19</sup> Between 1990 and 2000 the Latina/o population in the state increased by approximately 394% (Kochar, Suro and Tafoya 2005) The visual cues of change that we see in our public spaces—like tiendas, Cliff’s Meat Market and restaurant kitchens—are the culminating result of this massive, decades-long migration.

Food has been our immediate gateway to this realization, and the immigrant in food service—in this specific case, the Mexican immigrant—is normally portrayed as one who works for other people or owns a food-related business that adds to an eclectic diversity within the community. This influence is apparent in supermarkets, from Carrboro’s Weaver Street Coop Market to corner stores, run by both native North Carolinians and immigrants rooted in Hispanic and Latino cultures. The juxtaposition of expensive quinoa (a grain from the Andes) and simple habanero peppers costing mere

---

<sup>17</sup> Hannah Gill, *North Carolina and the Latino Migration Experience: New Roots in the Old North State*, (UNC Press, 2010) 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

pennies in comparison is an example of the affluent commodities that immigration has provided to our tastes and to our desire of consumption.

The influx of Latino immigrants is made apparent by a resulting revamped economic strategy for American capitalism, both on the corporate and local levels. As an example, Walmart adapted early to its new growing consumer market by translating signs in Spanish. Local business have taken a gentler approach that provides a more celebratory depiction of a changing market, using the addition of certain goods to sell product, but to also cater to tastes and make that taste more commonplace. Cliff's Meat Market in Carrboro has an all-Mexican butcher staff, all from Celaya, Guanajuato (Miguel's hometown) with the exception of one. The growing Mexican demographic is localized here at Cliff's, a food institution spanning more than four decades right in the center of a small Southern town that is still bustling and increasingly diverse. The visual cues of Mexican influence are obvious to any customer who walks in the door. A spool of labels stamped with the market's seal sits atop the meat counter, the words country sausage and chorizo tangled together. Pink pork flesh bears a crimson tint nestled in a chili and pineapple marinade, piled high into a plastic tray labeled "al pastor". Beef chuck is ground fresh when customers ask for it. Sliced skirt steak is pounded even thinner when Spanish speakers come in asking for a cut para empanizar—to bread and pan-fry. Canned Rose brand pork brains (a North Carolina favorite)<sup>20</sup> and Hunt's Manwich sauce sit on a shelf caddy-corner to a display of dried tamarind pods and green tomatillos bursting from

---

<sup>20</sup> On the website for Rose brand pork brains—canned in nutritious-sounding milk gravy with an "easy pull top lid"—N.C. Representative Howard Coble from Greensboro offers this robust endorsement: "When I was a youngster, my mom used to prepare Brains N' Eggs for breakfast ... So that's when I started eating them. I've enjoyed them ever since, but I can't find any on Capitol Hill."

their paper-thin, leafy husks. In scouting the shop for a documentary I directed in 2014<sup>21</sup>, I once noticed the sous chef from [one], the most expensive restaurant in Chapel Hill, narrowly miss bumping into a mound of tomatillos as he edged out of the store carrying a box piled high with racks of lamb. In the past, Reusing and Miguel ordered from Cliff's. This visual backdrop weaves together the elements of quotidian life and the foods worlds of Chapel Hill and Carrboro, and represents a celebration of its surrounding community.

But Miguel is more like the chef commanding a box of lamb ribs than one to peruse tomatillos or packages of queso fresco in the refrigerated case. His hands are poking heirloom tomatoes picked hours earlier, grazing a box of softshell crabs fresh off the North Carolina coast, and plucking fresh coriander seeds off the tiny stems he planted behind Lantern. Spending time with Miguel reveals a very clear command of the personal identity that mirrors who he portrays to the public: a chef.

In foodways, the conversation around ethnic chefs and cooks is often skewed toward the contribution of the immigrant. And even when that contribution may be a reflection of their voices and their entrepreneurial capital, it is still made for the consumption of a greater white American society and a majority unfamiliar with the culture, many of whom are unwilling to familiarize themselves beyond what they can eat and consume. A Mexican immigrant through a white person's lens is usually portrayed as giving or contributing something they already know how to do, rather than inventing or initiating the art in question. It would be remiss not to draw a parallel to the work of journalist and writer Toni Tipton-Martin, who researched hundreds of African-American cookbooks lost in and shielded by history for centuries. She not only points out the racist

---

<sup>21</sup> *Un Buen Carnicero*. Directed by Victoria Bouloubasis. Durham: Vittles Films, 2014. For the Southern Foodways Alliance



"magical" trope of an African-American cook (as featured in the profits made from the character of Aunt Jemima), but also argues for the humanity, intelligence, agency, and creative talents of African American men and women who contributed to the American/Southern culinary canon.<sup>22</sup>

### **The emergence of a young man through Latinization of the South**

University of North Carolina researchers dedicated an issue of *Southeastern Geographer* to exploring how “Latinization is shaping the dynamics of the place we know as North Carolina.” (Cravey, Valdivia 2011)<sup>23</sup> Here, Latinization refers to “the felt and observed presence of Latina/o peoples [that] is transforming established places, politically and materially, and has the potential to nurture the emergence of new places and subjectivities.” (2008: 215)<sup>24</sup> While Miguel’s presence certainly raises these questions and contributes to local Latinization, his identity is much more representative of the idea of emergence. As a teenaged immigrant from Mexico, Miguel found work in a taqueria—a familiar place. His mother sold tacos and other foods for years outside of factories in Celaya and the nearby agricultural and industrial town of Villagran. For Miguel to find work in such a place was a direct result of the migration patterns—and Latinization—that preceded him. He recalls, “It was the first taqueria in Carrboro. And I helped open that. It was a taqueria inside of a Mexican store. It was very rustic. At that

---

<sup>22</sup> Reminiscent of America’s approach to African-American women’s work in the kitchen as an inherent quality to the black race, rather than valuing it as a talent and skilled science that requires dedication, and one equal to the work white women put in to achieve their skills. Toni Tipton-Martin, *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African-American Cookbooks* (Univ. of Texas Press, 2015) 1-9.

<sup>23</sup> Altha Cravey and Gabriela Valdivia, “Carolina del Norte: An Introduction,” *Southeastern Geographer* 51 (2011): 215

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

time, there wasn't a lot of Mexicans here. Everyone was really together and took care of each other because they didn't have their families here. So I felt safe. And I was working in a good place already. That was kind of family, too."<sup>25</sup> Miguel arrived to the States with a family friend, and met up with two uncles already in Carrboro, with whom he lived. Within a year of his arrival, his uncles left. Miguel simply says they didn't like it. The one I met in Celaya, Juan, told me that being here made him depressed. But Miguel stuck it out. He came to the U.S. because he didn't think he had an opportunity for a better future in Celaya. "I just felt I was not great in school *aaaaaaand* I wanted to do something with my life," he says. "I grew up learning that if you are a hard worker, you can... you find your way in life. I'm not sure what would be the future if I stayed there."<sup>26</sup>



*Lantern chef de cuisine Miguel Torres. Photo by Victoria Bouloubasis (July 9, 2015)*

---

<sup>25</sup> Miguel Torres, interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Oct. 31, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Miguel Torres, interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Sept. 10, 2015

Driving Miguel's migration was the mission to earn money to help out his family. Beyond that, though, he was a young man with an appetite for adventure and independence. Writer Sarah Menkedick, who is currently a Fullbright fellow in Oaxaca, Mexico, insists that young migrants be considered beyond the sympathetic narratives of victimhood. In an essay for *Aeon*, she reveals a complexity in the immigrant narrative often ignored by "white, middle-class America" who instead is blinded by their feeling to "proudly empathize":

"Yes, young men leave these poor Mexican regions for pressing economic, political and historical reasons. Yet they also leave because they are 16 and spend their days hunched over fields in minuscule pueblos with little to offer them other than *campo* and cantina. They leave because they are curious, restless, bored. They leave because they got a postcard of a golden city from a friend now wiser and bolder and worldlier than them. They want adventure; they want to measure themselves against something bigger. They leave, in other words, for the same reasons that 22-year-old Americans take off for Asia with a *Lonely Planet* and starry-eyed notions of the Ganges."<sup>27</sup>

Miguel came of age in a liminal space between home and here, a place he never truly understood would become permanent. He still doesn't know if here is home, because it isn't up to him. If it were, he says he would travel all over Europe. He would retire early, in his 40s, after working nearly ninety-hour weeks for his entire adult life. "Like, my dream is like, I wanna be like 45 and retire. When you cook, it's a lot of work, it's a lot of hours, it's a lot of stress. So that would be my goal, just to retire and do the cooking because I want to and it's fun and I like that, more than I do for work."<sup>28</sup>

He left Celaya shortly after coming out as gay to his mother. During my first visit to the Torres family, no one asked me if Miguel was dating anyone, and no one assumed I had a romantic connection to him. (Unfortunately, this is often assumed of heterosexual

---

<sup>27</sup> Sarah Menkedick, "The Migrant's Tale" *Aeon*, Feb. 11, 2016

<sup>28</sup> Miguel Torres, interview with Victoria Bouloubasis. Carrboro, North Carolina, Oct. 31, 2015

friendships in traditional Mexican culture.) When I returned, I asked Miguel if his mother knew. He smiled a bit wryly and said “something happened with a neighbor” before he left for the U.S. He came out to his mother, who he said seemed all right with the news. Silvia never mentioned it again, and he chalks it up to her being religious. Despite never discussing his homosexuality, the two talk at least once a week and, after all these years, their strong bond has never wavered. Like many of our Mexican neighbors and peers in North Carolina, Miguel risked a dangerous route to get here through Texas, on foot. Speaking about it, he recalls it being difficult, but remembers the group who shared a coyote, or smuggler, warned him it would be a lot of walking. He beams with an almost childish pride when he recounts the story for me. “I used to walk a lot in Celaya. Every day, to the center of town. So I could handle it.”

A physical detachment from his family lent itself to his growing independence. Miguel, who is currently single, says he owes a lot of his socialization to American culture to an ex-boyfriend named Paul. They were together for ten years and still occasionally meet. “We still love each other, but it became more like brothers,” Miguel says of the breakup. Paul continues to be a helpful influence in Miguel’s life. With his guidance, Miguel bought a townhome in Carrboro. In his guest bathroom, a gift from Paul hangs on the wall above the toilet—a framed photo of the Golden Girls flecked with handwritten birthday messages to “Miguel,” “Mickey” and “pinche flaco” from Paul and friends. One of the very few times Miguel expressed an emotional pause in our conversation was when we spoke of his sister, Iveth, who he has spoken to about being gay. “She named her son Paul. I sometimes wonder why.”<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Through my personal interactions with Iveth, I did not feel comfortable prying and asking if her son, Vincent Paul, was named after Miguel’s ex-boyfriend Paul. Worthy of note: rather than the Spanish

As rumors in the 2016 news cycle began circulating about immigration raids, Miguel decided to meet with Paul. “He has access to all of my finances in case something happens.”<sup>30</sup> Now the option of early retirement seems more plausible due to the looming threat of deportation. If that were the case for Miguel, he says he would retire close to Celaya in the colonial town of San Miguel de Allende, only an hour away. Beyond fond memories of helping his mother shop for ingredients at the market, he rarely shares fond memories of Celaya. Miguel’s immediate family, who doesn’t like to travel much, has never been to San Miguel. I took a day trip there with Lucia Martinez, sister of Cliff’s Meat Market butcher Gerardo ‘Tolo’ Martinez, and her husband and son. When I told Iveth I was headed there, she laughed. “You’re going to see your people!” Set high on a rolling hill overlooking a beautiful cathedral, San Miguel is a Mexican haven for ex-pats, mostly Americans and Northern Europeans. As we drove into town with the car windows rolled down, the unmistakable scent of sunscreen wafted toward me. Sun tan lotion is not a Mexican smell. Sunscreen smells like gringos. Each chic shop we wandered through along the cobblestone streets in the town’s bustling historic center offered art, jewelry, ceramics and other gifts found in other regions of Mexico, but at triple the price. The first store employee to greet us, a young, white, college-aged girl, didn’t even speak Spanish. She was hired to attend to the tourists. In another shop, one peddling crocheted items that Lucia said she could make for a fraction of the price, the store’s owner, a middle-aged white woman who lived in town, greeted us in poorly accented formalities: “Bway-nass

---

versions of that same name, Vicente Pablo, Iveth and many other parents in Mexico choose English names for their children.

<sup>30</sup> More on this in Chapter Four.

TAR-days.”<sup>31</sup> Miguel has never been to this city, though he has heard all about its beauty and rich reputation. It’s where he dreams of retiring, though, with a house on the outskirts, chickens pattering around in his garden.

### **Journey to chef de cuisine**

A conversation with Miguel (who, only two years my senior, is undoubtedly my peer) is like speaking with any other colleague in the food world. I felt the same way when I spent a day with Luis Ortega in Celaya, who cooked at Crook’s Corner for nearly a decade. These men, navigating the world of fine dining and becoming an integral part of it, represent a growing sect of my generation and a creative class obsessed with food. In fact, they are quietly leading the pack, possessing enviable culinary knowledge and skill. Observing Miguel in the Lantern kitchen is more like watching an episode of *Mind of a Chef*, a Netflix series rooted in the camaraderie of mostly white young male chefs who have achieved celebrity status and are worshipped by those in their field and the rest of the ‘foodie’ generation. He doesn’t speak of Mexico or reminisce of home cooking in a way that we may be socialized to expect. His mother even sent him a molcajete once, a giant traditional cement mortar and pestle from the market in Celaya, used to grind spices and emulsify salsas by hand. Miguel didn’t keep it. Instead, he gifted it to Rosa, who works a daytime pastry and prep shift. She hand rolls all of Lantern’s dumplings, and has been described as the “abuelita” of the group, even though she is only in her 40’s. From Veracruz, Rosa enjoys cooking traditional Mexican food for her husband and children at home and for the staff at Lantern on the occasion that they have time for a big staff lunch.

---

<sup>31</sup> Buenas tardes should be pronounced: bweh-nahs tar-dehs.

She used Silvia's gifted molcajete to make a traditional tomato-based salsa with Thai chilies on Nov. 3, 2015, to accompany Miguel's carnitas lunch for the staff. Though Miguel and Rosa have spent almost the same amount of time in the States, their food voices and habits differ greatly. They are both just as serious about their craft as cooks. But Rosa says she cooks Mexican foods at home for her family. The rest of the cooks do the same, for each other (they are all roommates), with the same order and focused technique as they fry up the wok at work. Miguel is more likely to nibble on leftovers during service and eat big meals out with the rest of the local service industry, akin to the cool kid's table in high school.

Miguel's eating habits and tendencies reflect that of a true chef. But it took him a long time to consider himself one. In his words:

"I don't think there was a day that I said that I'm a chef. Every week it's something different. And every week the conversation was like, "Oh, now I'm washing dishes." Or, "Now I'm learning how to prep the vegetables or process herbs." I learned the names of all these herbs. And now I'm doing bread. And you know, it was like, changing a little bit at a time."<sup>32</sup>

New York University food studies professor Krishnendu Ray dedicates his research on ethnic cuisine, and highlights this socialized phenomenon in his most recent book, *The Ethnic Restaurateur*.

"The new American chef is born in spaces between three positions: the (female) domestic cook, the (colored male) ethnic cook, and the (white or Asian male) professional chef. In the public domain, the untrained cook and the school-trained American chef are precise foils of each other. Interviews with immigrant restaurateurs working in the domain of "ethnic cuisine" underline that they do not inhabit the same field as American chefs in the making." (Ray 2016: 115)<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Miguel Torres, interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Sept. 10, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Krishnendu Ray, *The Ethnic Restaurateur*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016) 105-115.

Mexican and Latino immigrant chefs who have achieved a level of public status more normalized in American society—like Enrique Olvera of Cosme in New York—were already a part of a whiter, upper class within their own cultural hierarchy. Olvera also owns Pujol in Mexico City, lauded as one of the best restaurants in the world. His website lists ten companies as his own, related to catering, restaurants and food media. He has been featured in high-end magazines reserved for celebrities, not just chefs. *Vogue* magazine’s profile of Olvera is a recent example.<sup>34</sup> Olvera represents the evolution of a privileged class of ethnic minorities—those with legal status—who have historically edged their way into the spotlight. He belongs, though, to a new celebrity chefdom based more on artistic merit than pulled-up-from-your-bootstraps business sense. Traditionally the Chinese, Italians, and Greeks dominated niches of food service because of ethnic ties to the labor market. (Ray 2016: 108)<sup>35</sup> While those niches do exist now, the underground economy has become more subversive due to the cooks and “ethnic” restaurateurs’ lack of legal status. Very few undocumented immigrants have been noted for their talents as chefs in a public sphere. Among those who have (though not on Olvera’s level) are Natalia Mendez and Antonio Saavedra, the owners of La Morada in the Bronx, New York, and Cristina Martinez, an undocumented chef-owner of Barbacoa in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. All three chefs are Mexican. The public activism of Mendez and Saavedra’s son, Marco Saavedra<sup>36</sup>, has eased the entire family into being open about their

---

<sup>34</sup> Tamar Adler, “Superstar Chef Enrique Olvera Will Change The Way You Think About Mexican Food” *Vogue*, June 30, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Disclosure: Marco Saavedra is a friend of mine, whom I met in 2011 while community organizing around immigrant rights.



undocumented status.<sup>37</sup> Martinez made her story public with the help of her citizen husband and co-owner Ben Miller.<sup>38</sup>

Miguel's transition from an undocumented dishwasher to chef de cuisine may be considered uncommon only because the stories are deemed too risky to tell.<sup>39</sup> While he was working at Elaine's, Lantern offered him more money to leave and work full-time there as a prep cook. Miguel remembers calling his mother in Celaya, who he had not seen in nearly four years at this point, to ask for her advice.

"I remember having a conversation with her [his mother, Silvia] when Lantern offered me more money. And I was like, this is a big deal. I'm with somebody who I really really like, which is Brett Jennings, and I don't want to disappoint him. But I also feel like this was a great opportunity and I cannot miss it. And so my mom, you know I talked to her... she was like, yeah. I was scared. Because Andrea [Reusing] is famous for being really tough. For liking things in very specific ways. But you know, the money was right. I was gonna work less. It worked out. I was 22."

After making the switch to Lantern, Miguel says he focused less on saving all his money and moving back home—which was the initial plan—and decided to put his attention into adapting to Carolina culture and succeeding as a chef.

"You know, by maybe year five, I started realizing that being here, I can help my family. And I just kind of stopped thinking about it. I started talking English. I knew a lot, but you feel embarrassed. But that's when I started feeling more comfortable. The first year I started thinking, 'I wanna go home, I wanna go home.' But after that first Christmas, I was like, 'uh. I don't know.'"

He continued by explaining why he is here:

"I'm helping a lot. And I felt like I had to make the best of [it], and still try to be happy. And seeing that I could help my mom and my family. And already doing

---

<sup>37</sup> Ligaya Mishan, "Opening Oaxaca to the World: La Morada in the South Bronx" *New York Times*, Feb. 26, 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Matza, "Philly restaurateur takes on immigration" *Philly.com*, Nov. 4, 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Elaboration on the risks in Chapter Four.

something that I like. It was a good combination. So, I didn't think about it anymore after that."

**"Mickey es el patron."**

Line cook Javier<sup>40</sup> calls Mickey el patron: the boss. "Something about being in charge. It just happens very naturally for me," Miguel says. "I like it. I like responsibilities."<sup>41</sup> Before Andrea Reusing won her James Beard award, no one in the kitchen had an official title. After earning the award<sup>42</sup>, she designated Miguel as chef de cuisine. He was featured in this role in a 2011 *News & Observer* article "Second Helpers: Meet the chefs who help four well-known chefs shine" written by Andrea Weigl.<sup>43</sup> The first time I visited his family, Miguel only requested two things before I left: the delivery of an iPad and a translation of that article in Spanish for his mother, along with the hard copy.

---

<sup>40</sup> For this thesis, I do not have explicit permission by the cooks or their boss to use their last names.

<sup>41</sup> Miguel Torres, Interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Sept. 10, 2015

<sup>42</sup> It is unclear whether the James Beard Foundation required a list of official staff titles or if the designation was Reusing's choice.

<sup>43</sup> Andrea Weigl, "Second Helpers: meet the chefs who help four well-known chefs shine." *News & Observer*, May 27, 2011.



*A copy of the News & Observer's 2011 article "Second Helpers" with accompanying translation. Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico. Photo by Victoria Bouloubasis. (July 11, 2015)*

Miguel's domain is the Lantern kitchen. Piquant and spicy XO sauce—a trendy food item on nearly every Asian-inspired menu in America—is fired up in a large wok scalded by years of service, seasoned with a numbing mix of spices, casting a scent that permeates through the kitchen and blends into the sound waves of cumbia and reggaeton music coming from a cell phone speaker set in a plastic food container, to augment the ambiance. Shelves of full plastic food containers are marked by masking tape labels and read the names of various hot dried chilies and freshly ground spices, like coriander and fried shallots. It is a hipster's pantry dream. Those who feed us possess a power over us.<sup>44</sup> They know our tastes and the alchemy it takes to reach a level of euphoria on our palates, even momentary. Miguel touches every single plate of food the moment before it reaches the diner's table. Workers like him are thrust into intimate spaces with the public—the very food they ingest—with complete control over the experience. Cooks know the tastes

<sup>44</sup> Krishnendu Ray, *The Ethnic Restaurateur*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016) 10.

of whom they are serving and the tastes and desires of the superiors who have hired them to do the work. (Tompkins 2012)<sup>45</sup> An employer, in this case Reusing, sets the tone for what is expected as to execute the menu during service, and her years of working with Miguel has entrusted that he will get it right. Miguel has developed both his skill but also intuition during his tenure at Lantern, and has mentioned that he is “the only one who can read her mind.” When she is not there, his own ideas, filtered through her vision and instruction, are passed along to the rest of the crew, of which he is in charge.<sup>46</sup> “It’s four, five hours where all of our minds are connected,” he says of the kitchen staff during service.<sup>47</sup> His meticulous execution leads up to the final moment before the plate is passed onto a waiter. He peers over every dish, rearranging a shrimp or a cilantro sprig if it looks off kilter. He swiftly wipes the rims of every dish and bowl with a kitchen towel, swiping any cooking residue or misplaced drop of sauce. With a hefty pinch of coarse sea salt, he showers every single plate with one last rush between his fingers. If diners request extreme modifications to a dish strictly because of tastes, and not allergies, Miguel becomes peeved. “It drives me crazy. It really drives me crazy. I think that’s insulting. Because we spend a lot of time in thinking and putting together all these dishes.”<sup>48</sup>

Miguel’s aspirations mark that of the American chef Ray describes, despite the barriers along his path. Because of Reusing’s lessons, rooted in her intimate relationship

---

<sup>45</sup> Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York University Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>46</sup> Details on the back of the house dynamic in the next chapter.

<sup>47</sup> Miguel Torres, Interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Carrboro, North Carolina, Oct. 31, 2015

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

with local terroir and keen sense of taste, Miguel's own intuition is elevated to an enviable level of skill and talent. He slides through cooking techniques with an ease only achieved by years of practice. Marcie Cohen Ferris details a chapter on new Southern cuisine in her book *The Edible South*. There, she includes back of the house immigrant cooks at Chapel Hill's Crook's Corner and mentions Andrea Reusing and Miguel Torres. The food that mostly Mexican immigrant workers are crafting in these kitchens is helping launch the next level of Southern cuisine, particularly in North Carolina.<sup>49</sup> It is what Bill Smith simply calls the Nuevo South, food unadorned by gimmicks but rather intrinsically valued by not only the hands that craft it, but the minds that inspire the food to exist. Ferris's inclusion of Miguel, and the subsequent mention of him in Reusing's cookbook and media about her restaurant, places him among a select few of immigrant chefs recognized as makers of new Southern cuisine. The food world he occupies, one in which he is a leader, shows a negotiation of the identities he encapsulates. While Miguel's work further defines new Southern cuisine, his actual existence in the kitchen as an undocumented worker influenced by a career in the spotlight also makes him a new southerner.

---

<sup>49</sup> Marcie Cohen Ferris, *The Edible South*, (UNC Press, 2014)

## CHAPTER 2: The Big Leagues

*“I don’t know how to say it in English. But I always tell them: estamos en las Grandes Ligas” – Miguel Torres*



*Lantern back of the house staff portrait on the patio. Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Photo by Victoria Bouloubasis. (July 9, 2015)<sup>50</sup>*

Every year, as a gesture of gratitude, Miguel invites his line cooks to sit down and enjoy a meal together—one they do not prepare. Most of the cooks are close to racking

---

<sup>50</sup> Miguel wasn’t wearing his chef’s jacket before we took the photo. His staff insisted he run inside and put it on for the photograph.

up a decade of experience in the kitchen. Miguel's tenure is 18 years, with Ramiro not trailing too far behind at thirteen.<sup>51</sup>

It would not be presumptuous, then, to assume that they have developed a culinary expertise far superior to any diner's palate, even someone who frequently eats out. The men in Lantern's kitchen hold positions coveted by anyone interested in a culinary career. While much of the prep cooks, line cooks and sous chefs behind the great chefs are ethnic immigrants and African Americans, attaining head chef status is a largely white ideal. For example, in 2010, the Culinary Institute of America's graduates were 59 percent white, 7 percent "international," 5 percent Hispanic and 3 percent Asian and/or Pacific Islander. Twenty-four percent was listed as "unknown," which Ray insists are "in all probability white." (Ray 2016)<sup>52</sup>

Miguel made a reservation at Elaine's for Sept. 8, 2015 and invited me to join the group for dinner. Later, fry cook Javier joked that it was less of a gracious invitation and more the fact that they like "having paparazzi around." I had my own reservations about crashing their dinner, which is an important annual tradition among Lantern's core cooks: Miguel, Romero, Ramiro, Javier and Oscar (who couldn't make it). I also had an evening class that ran until after 7 p.m. Still, Miguel insisted I arrive whenever I could. I slip into the restaurant as Miguel, Romeo, Ramiro and Javier were finishing their second course. I am wearing my school backpack, which is tattered at the straps, bulging with books and my laptop, blue jeans and Converse sneakers. I walk past tables full of big parties of

---

<sup>51</sup> Ramiro, also from Celaya, is the only kitchen worker at Lantern with a second job. He works another almost-daily shift in the kitchen at Top of the Hill. His children back in Mexico are grown, and a second job helps him support them. One of his daughters recently graduated from law school with her father's financial support. He is very proud to talk about it and show photos.

<sup>52</sup> Krishnendu Ray, *The Ethnic Restaurateur*, (Bloomsbury Academic 2016), 142.

middle-aged to more senior white people, the majority of whom looked like businessmen meeting on a Tuesday evening. By the door I notice a large table of men who were perhaps scholars, Dr. William Ferris sitting with them. To the right and back toward the bar, Lantern's men are poised comfortably at a round table draped in a white tablecloth, they themselves clad in slim, pressed, button-down shirts and slacks. They were the only Latino men I noticed in that full dining room. Ramiro's hair stood up in a premeditated coif, waves lightly tousled in hair cream. I realized then that I had never seen him without a hat on in the kitchen. I had never interacted with any of them, except for Miguel, outside of the kitchen, period.

Elaine's and Lantern are places for the affluent and, even then, often times reserved for special occasions. Admittedly, I couldn't ignore the cooks' seemingly extraneous presence in that room full of predominately white men. However, they navigate the spaces of fine dining rooms comfortably, with an ease made astute by their intimate knowledge with the food that seduces diners into those spaces. I am much less accustomed to fine dining than those who frequent restaurants like Elaine's and Lantern, but the cooks are truthfully the ones with the most leverage in these spaces because through the food menu, its execution and presentation, fine dining is a normality to them. They create those delectable and impressionable experiences for the public nearly every day. Instead, the precarious Western perspective expects to witness a group of Latino diners more likely at a taqueria, where their presence affirms Western ideas of authenticity. It is common practice for food writers and general food enthusiasts to seek out places where *they*, as white people, are considered the minority as a sign of culinary legitimacy. (I have been guilty of this myself.) Even further, it perpetuates the notion of



discovery; the resulting food media or personal anecdotes after such an experience are relayed as an adventure. A recent article in the *News & Observer* followed two prominent white pastry chefs to their favorite Raleigh taquerias, deducing the experience to a “quest” and a “hunt” rooted in “taco obsession.” A sub-headline even reads: “A sign of a good taqueria: Non-Hispanics are a minority.”<sup>53</sup> This is actually inaccurate, considering the majority of Hispanics is from South America and doesn’t cook tacos or even use tortillas. In contrast to this common trope, through a white lens, a reservation at a fancy restaurant for a group of immigrant workers is more illusory than it is real. Miguel is very conscious of this and deliberately offers his staff the experience of “seeing how it from the other side.”<sup>54</sup> They do, in fact, know where to get the best tacos, pupusas *and* duck confit in town.

Moments after my arrival to Elaine’s, Javier leans back and rests his palms on his belly. The group had ordered various dishes to share, which are now excavated down to just a morsel or two. Each plate had been pushed to the center of the table with those morsels deliberately saved there for me to try. This is an example of one of many prolific nourishing gestures during my fieldwork. Even while muttering a dirty joke or in the middle of service, someone in the Lantern kitchen would always place something in front of me to consume and enjoy, whether it be a spoonful of muddled berries from the dessert station or a plate of Korean fried chicken and a can of Negra Modelo (or two).

The men had ordered courses heavily focused on meat, like duck tucked in a creamy mushroom and pea roux and a filet mignon cooked medium rare. Dessert included a classic standard on Elaine’s menu listed as “Elaine’s warm chocolate cake

---

<sup>53</sup> Andrea Weigl, “Taco Quest: 2 Raleigh men hunt for the best tacos,” *News & Observer*, Sept. 3, 2015

<sup>54</sup> Conversation with Miguel Torres, Lantern kitchen, Sept. 7, 2015.

with dulce de leche ice cream.” The men chuckle as they order it. “Es de Rosa!” It is actually Rosa’s cake, they tell me. A former pastry cook at Elaine’s, Rosa is the aforementioned maternal figure in Lantern’s kitchen, who assists Yadira with pastries and desserts while working a shift in day prep as the sole dumpling maker. Apparently every kitchen worker in town knows this secret about “Elaine’s” cake.

### **Acquired tastes**

Javier points to steak on the plate and asks me, “¿Te gusta así con sangre?” (Do you like it like that... bloody?) He goes on to tell me that in Mexico he would never have eaten it that way. The rest of the men nod in agreement. It leads to a discussion at the table about how they learned here, in North Carolina, what quality meat looks and tastes like. After a few years of helping to butcher a large cut of local beef or searing sustainably raised pork chops and quitting immediately when the pink turns white, the men have developed a palate for rare and medium rare, without fear of contamination. Oscar, who wasn’t present at the table discussion, later explains:

“Like I’ve said, I didn’t know how to cook. So I learned here. In my case, I practice [at home] what I cook there [at the restaurant]. An example, meat. Before I ate meat cooked all the way through. And now I don’t like that. I like it more red.”<sup>55</sup>

In an interview two days after the Elaine’s dinner, Miguel elaborates on the transformation immigrants in the kitchen face related to eating very red meat.

---

<sup>55</sup> Original dialogue in Spanish: “Como te digo, yo no sabía cocinar. Entonces yo aprendí aquí. Yo en mi caso practico lo que cocino allá. Pues un ejemplo, como la carne. Antes yo comía toda la carne muy cocida. Ahora me gusta más roja.” Victoria Bouloubasis and Andrea Patiño Contreras, “La Comida de Los Cocineros/Line Cooks at Home,” *Feet in Two Worlds*, Nov. 2015 (video documentary)

“One of the things is that... you know, like, a few of my coworkers, most of them, only have this job. Some others got here ten years ago let’s say and they would get a hamburger in a nice place. And they ask you, ‘do you want blood on it or not?’ And the first thing is like, ‘no, I don’t want any blood.’ But then you get this giant ten-ounce burger and it’s cooked all the way and it’s dry and gross. And then you start learning how to work in temperatures. And then you see here that people really cares [sic] about where the meat comes from. And here at Lantern, we really do care about that. With the pork. With the beef. What they eat. You know? And we see all these customers ordering rare, medium rare. Eating tartars. And know that our product is better than anyone else in town. And that’s what Javier was saying, if you know where it comes from, I think you can eat [it] raw.”<sup>56</sup>

Miguel’s words allude to equating an elevated taste for meat as a desire for higher quality. Meat represents the basic sustenance of life as well as what makes us human—our flesh and blood. And the limits to what a human carnivore can eat are almost endless. The carnivorous human stands at the top of the food chain, a position of strength and power above everything else. This is a case used by many Americans who have been socialized to ingest and enjoy meat as a primary source of their protein, nearly 200 pounds per person a year. In health- and eco-conscious food worlds—often viewed as a separate level of societal class—good meat is cared for as soon as it exists, with skill and responsibility, to give us the ultimate form of nourishment. In writing about raising and honoring quality meat, poet and farmer Wendell Berry once wrote: “Husbandry is the name of all the practices that sustain life by connecting us conservingly to our places and our world; it is the art of keeping tied all the strands in the living network that sustains us.”<sup>57</sup> To eat with this conscience in America is still an expensive and elite ideal, one that many low-wage immigrant workers aren’t able to attain. Still, it is one that Andrea Reusing builds her restaurant ethos upon. She told writer Moreton Neal in 2008:

---

<sup>56</sup> Miguel Torres, Interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Sept. 10, 2015

<sup>57</sup> Deborah Krasner, *Good Meat: The Complete Guide to Sourcing and Cooking Sustainable Meat*, (Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 2010), 7.

“That is everything to me. When you consume food it is a very intimate act, and it is richer and more rewarding if you consume food grown by people you know and love. And the closer you can get to that, the better the experience is. The last thing we have tethering us to the earth is the food we eat. It is the last thing that connects us to being animals ourselves.”<sup>58</sup>

Working under Reusing’s guidance, Miguel has adapted to this ethos on a personal level, and, in turn, has passed down that knowledge to the cooking staff. When the line cooks, who all live together, shop for Sunday supper at home, they risk driving without a license to a tienda in Durham where they have met the butcher and can gauge the quality of his meat the morning they prepare a certain dish.

In Mexico, meat is most definitely a staple, though—as Javier and Oscar noted—it is cooked completely through until there is no red left. Most of the cuts for the grill or pan are sliced thin. Most every other meat is stewed or slow-roasted for hours. And while breakfast dishes to late-night snacks are meat-heavy, the presence of meat is nearly dwarfed by the accompanying tortillas, tostadas or fluffy bread rolls, rice, beans, salsas and varying condiments. Steak in Mexico is served thin and nearly burnt. The only red in any meat appears if soaked in a chili marinade. Choice cuts are hard to come by and cost prohibitive for the majority of Mexican families in Celaya on a budget. Therefore, freshly pulled carnitas and cuts to order are bought at a butcher, who is considered skillful and important, relied upon by everyone in his or her proximity. Every small colonia, or neighborhood, has at least one small corner butcher shop anchoring a block of homes. Before I visited the Torres family in Celaya for the first time, Miguel and I collaborated on a video tour of Lantern’s kitchen for his mother (and the rest of his family) to see. In one scene, he uses a sharp knife to glide through a slab of raw steak like butter. With one

---

<sup>58</sup> Moreton Neal, “The Soul of Slow Food: North Carolina Chef Andrea Reusing forms a delicious and ambitious partnership with area farmers,” *Garden & Gun*, March/April 2008

hand resting at the top of the beef to keep it steady, he moves the knife in a steady, rhythmic motion that slices the flesh into thin layers, and later, in a couple of chops, dices them into strips before throwing them in a bowl. He does this while simultaneously talking to the camera and answering shouts from one of the cooks on when to set the oven temperature, and for how long. His calm manner carries him through his actions effortlessly; he makes it look easy. When Miguel's mother, Silvia Torres saw this scene, she pursed her lips, raised her eyebrows and gave a nod all in one fell swoop. It was that universal look of approval only a mother could convey. She was impressed. "Sabe muchas cosas." He knows a lot of things. Again, meat and butchery are seen as necessary but very specialized skills in Celaya—those of an expert. She brought up that same scene the next day in conversation, and said it was a moment she realized that he truly is a chef.

Miguel's acquired locavore taste for high quality meat presents a metaphor for meat as a way to establish identity and place in American society. In her research on the social history of U.S. food culture, Jennifer Jensen Wallach notes that "Americans have filled their stomachs as a nonverbal way of articulating ideas about what it has meant historically to be an American or an outsider; a man or a woman; a modern or a conservative thinker; a member of a particular racial or ethnic group..." (2013).<sup>59</sup> Life, like meat, is making the most out of what you've got and creating sustenance for yourself. You get the cut you're dealt. Some of the tougher bits need to be tenderized, pounded out, ground up. You can simmer or sear to your liking, to make the rough parts easier to chew—to make life delicious. When a choice bit comes along, you savor it. In the changing South, how opportunities and realities vary for people who are living,

---

<sup>59</sup> Jennifer Jensen Wallach, *How America Eats: A Social History of U.S. Food and Culture*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), xi.

working and producing food side by side in the same place. Lantern gives Miguel and his cohort exposure to the most expensive, highest quality food and an income that allows for the occasional special dinner like Elaine's. The difference in the way that Miguel and his cooks are eating now and how their families are eating back home represents their acquired tastes not just for food, but also for a desired lifestyle. The cooks still prefer to make Mexican food on Sundays at home, or go out for pupusas in Durham (where I have run into them on two separate occasions). Miguel, instead, explores new American haunts to taste what else chefs are doing. He, of course, frequents The Durham when he can, and once spoke very highly of the Heavenly Buffaloes wing shack in Durham. While he speaks fondly of family gatherings and says he thinks back about his mother's gorditas, he did offer me a curt warning before I left for Mexico that his mother would most likely make good but "simple food." Psyche A. Williams-Forsson writes about this in relation to middle-class African Americans in the 1920s who aimed to disassociate themselves from "foods heavily connected to 'the folk.'" Accordingly, 'the thinking Negro[es]' focused their attention upon 'the distorted perspective' that rendered black people, and especially working-class black people, as a social problem." (2006)<sup>60</sup> Miguel's acquired tastes here in America coupled with a position of power in the kitchen over other immigrants allow him to identify with a class of which he yearns to belong. In the video made for his mother, Miguel expressed, in Spanish and in his signature confidence, his gratitude for being where he needed to be. Translated: "There are people that spend their entire lives

---

<sup>60</sup> Psyche A. Williams-Forsson, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black women, food, and power*, (UNC Press, 2010), 94.

thinking of what they want to do. I'm lucky to know that this is what I want to do with my life."<sup>61</sup>



*Chef de cuisine Miguel Torres on the Lantern patio. Video still by Victoria Bouloubasis (July 2015)*

## **Las Grandes Ligas**

Oscar can fry an egg like no other cook on his line. But before he got to the United States to work in a James Beard award-winning restaurant kitchen, he didn't even know how to flip a tortilla. Today, Oscar's perfectly fried eggs top nearly half of the locally sourced menu items at Lantern. Oscar lives with Javier, Ramiro and his brother, who cooks at nearby Kipos Greek restaurant. On Sundays, their day off (Lantern is closed), they usually invite fellow cook Romeo to gather together for one big meal, or comida. While Miguel does not participate, he was the one who initially told me about their Sunday routine and suggested I ask to tag along. The men source ingredients from Mebane's Buckhorn Flea Market, which is now unofficially called la pulga in Mexican social circles. It is, indeed, is reminiscent of a pulga (flea market) in Mexico. At

---

<sup>61</sup> Miguel Torres, Video Interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, July 9, 2015.

Buckhorn, one man even learned how to yell “CA-CA-HUUU-AYYY-TES” to peddle his peanuts to Spanish-speaking customers<sup>62</sup>. The market sells artisan clay mugs and pots from Michoacan, Mexico, crisp chicharron, the tropical and Southern Mexican fruit mamey, and even freshly made Mexican cheeses from a man who pulls them out of a cooler until he runs out. Even the shrimp and shellfish stand, selling seafood from the North Carolina and Gulf coasts, is run by a bilingual, multigenerational Mexican family from the coastal region of Nayarit. The cooks alternate between two culinary worlds: the kitchen at Lantern and the kitchen at home. In the latter, the men celebrate their strong connection to their homes in Mexico through the food they cook using the very fine skills they have learned at work. Oscar plates a chile relleno at home with the same precise care he uses to nestle Lantern’s sizzling crabcakes onto a lush bed of local greens. Javier, who mans the fryer at work, delegates each roommate a task throughout the home cooking process. In a cramped apartment in Carrboro, the men perform the very same artistry that feeds foodie society’s highest standards.

As noted in Chapter Two, Javier and the rest of Lantern’s cooks call Miguel, or Mickey, el patron—the boss. In her best-selling cookbook, Andrea Reusing confirms: “Miguel Torres runs the kitchen at Lantern<sup>63</sup>.” The food world he occupies, one in which he is a leader, shows a negotiation of the identities he encapsulates. For example, he often conveys his shared identity with other Mexican and Latino immigrants, especially in reference to the legal and political barriers they are collectively up against. It is important to note how Miguel’s contributions through his work as a chef show the personal responsibility he feels to prove himself to American society, and, in turn, prove that his

---

<sup>62</sup> The Spanish word for peanut used in Mexico is cacahuete.

<sup>63</sup> Andrea Reusing, *Cooking in the Moment*, (Clarkson Potter, 2011), 235.



fellow immigrants are capable of the same accomplishments. When I initially approached him about this ethnography project, he mentioned on numerous occasions that if everyone were to be deported, Chapel Hill restaurants would shut down. But even though the kitchens are replete with immigrants, the workers have a lot to prove. Miguel embraced his role as a teacher in the kitchen so that no one would fail or be responsible for the restaurant's failure. He explains that, about ten years ago,

“it felt like there was a transition where a lot of people didn't want to work in restaurants anymore. and you know, like Crook's Corner, an all Latino kitchen. Elaine's is an all Latino kitchen. 411 [restaurant], you know? Top of the Hill. All these restaurants in town. You see, maybe the person in charge will be some other culture. But it's all Mexicans. Guatemalans. And so, I guess my focus was, we need to make sure that we don't let people down. That the quality of the food doesn't go down. Because, where we come from, we can cook chicken for two hours to think that it's cooked, to feel like it's tender. And teaching that takes time.”<sup>64</sup>

He followed that with a Spanish phrase, the only time in an interview where he didn't express himself in English. “I don't know how to say it in English. But I always tell them: *estamos en las Grandes Ligas*.”<sup>65</sup> (We are in the Big Leagues.) Javier is a cook who feels most guided by his patron. Miguel says he and Andrea both saw Javier's potential early. Javier enjoys cooking, and says he owes the spark to his mother in Mexico, but owes his courage to Miguel. In his (translated) words:

“More than just liking it, I love it [cooking]. With a hunger to learn everything. The nerves overcame me sometimes. I had just learned how to work one line and they switched me to another line. And Miguel told me ‘Yes, yes you can do it!’ Because Miguel used to cook [on the line]. And he tells me, ‘I'll be here at your side.’ He says, ‘I'm going to help you.’”<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Miguel Torres, Interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Sept. 10, 2015

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Original dialogue in Spanish: “Bueno, mas que me gusta, si me encanta. Con hambre de querer aprender todo. Me ganaban a veces más los nervios. Que apenas me había aprendido lo que era una línea y me pasan

Miguel believes his indefatigable work ethic helped him climb to the top. He sees the same motivation in everyone he works with and everyone he hires (who he undoubtedly chooses to work with).

“I feel really proud of all these people, because they are really focused on what they are doing. And they are great at what they are doing now. And, you know, it was that time, those years, where it was in transition where, the dream of being a celebrity chef or going to culinary school... those years are over. People realize that you can go to culinary school and you can pay tons and tons of money for that. And once you leave that school, you’re not gonna be a sous chef. You’re not gonna be a chef de cuisine. You have to go back to the basics, and work hard to get there.”<sup>67</sup>

This point about culinary school graduates is made under the same breath at finding it hard to hire either a graduate, someone with very limited experience or a non-immigrant to work his or her way up from the bottom. At Lantern, according to Miguel, everyone begins as a dishwasher. Crook’s Corner chef Bill Smith agrees. “For a native-born person to be a dishwasher—that’s a disgrace.”<sup>68</sup>

During service, the “bottom” is not apparent. Miguel says he can be strict and can “go crazy,” though I hadn’t noticed the several times I spent in the kitchen. “I mean, everybody has a bad day. But I think everyone at work tries really hard not to affect the

---

a otra línea nueva. Y Miguel me dijo “Si, si puedes!” Porque Miguel también antes cocinaba. Y él me decía, “Yo voy a estar aquí a tu lado.” Dice, “Yo te voy a ayudar.” Victoria Bouloubasis and Andrea Patiño Contreras, “La Comida de Los Cocineros/Line Cooks at Home,” *Feet in Two Worlds*, Nov. 2015 (video documentary)

<sup>67</sup> Miguel Torres, Interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Sept. 10, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Bill Smith, Interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, April 1, 2016

rest of the team.”<sup>69</sup> The dynamic he enforces is about connecting each other’s psyches and moods to get the job done most efficiently, and with grace.

“I read a ticket and everyone is thinking about what the other person is doing, and when they gonna do it and the time has to be the same. Somebody will have an appetizer that takes four minutes and someone else, one minute. And you wait. Everything has to be ready at the same time. Otherwise, if somebody comes out earlier — we’re crazy about things to be ready two minutes earlier.”<sup>70</sup>

He notes that the cooperation may be rare, compared to other restaurants.

“And we all talk about it. Just remind ourselves that it’s kind of like supporting somebody. If somebody gets busier, we all know what to do. If somebody new comes in the restaurant, it’s like, ‘Wow, I’ve never worked in a restaurant where it’s all like a team. Somebody can’t help you. It’s your own station, your own thing, figure it out.’ I’m like, ‘No, that’s not how it works here. You work one station and you’re going to learn what to do to help people on your right, on your left. You’re going to ask. They’re going to tell you what to do in case it gets really busy. So you’re not in the way.’ That can also be a problem. You can get in the way by not helping.”

The overall positive environment that Miguel curates at work is only augmented by the cooks’ home lives. Oscar eloquently describes the cooperation and familial life they have together: “We are family here now. We go to work together, we come home together. We are together most of the time, almost all of us. I think my second family is here. My first is in Mexico. But here they are. We help each other out.”<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> Miguel Torres, Interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Carrboro, North Carolina, Oct. 31, 2016.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Original dialogue in Spanish: “Somos familia aquí ya. Nos vamos juntos al trabajo, regresamos juntos, andamos juntos la mayoría de las veces, todos casi. Yo pienso que aquí está mi segunda familia. Mi primera está en Mexico, pero aquí son. Nos ayudamos entre todos.” Victoria Bouloubasis and Andrea Patiño Contreras, “La Comida de Los Cocineros/Line Cooks at Home,” *Feet in Two Worlds*, Nov. 2015 (video documentary)

“It is like a family,” Miguel says. “We have so much time working together and it’s a good place to work.”<sup>72</sup>

### **“A gallows humor”**

Miguel cut his teeth as a fine dining cook at Elaine’s. Chef Brett Jennings first offered him a dishwashing gig that quickly turned into a spot at the prep table. At his family home in Celaya, Miguel’s mother, Silvia, keeps a framed photograph from his days at Elaine’s beside the phone on a side console close to the dining table. In the photo, Miguel is around 19 or 20 years old and very slim, smiling, no facial hair, a boyish face that is more nose than cheeks. His chef’s whites fall loose on his wiry frame. Above the left pocket, two words are embroidered in black thread and cursive script: *Pinche Flaco*. Fucking skinny guy. I tell Miguel I’ve seen the photo in his mother’s house, and he chuckles. Pinche this, pinche that. It’s common Mexican slang that even the Guatemalans, like Romeo, have picked up in Lantern’s kitchen. The inevitable residue of “kitchen Spanish” and its accompanying crass humor remain a constant in any restaurant kitchen. Even my Greek grandmother in my family’s Winston-Salem diner would wash dishes side by side with her favorite employee, Roberto, and yell out *pendejo*, a playful pejorative he taught her to call someone stupid. (It literally means a strand of pubic hair.)<sup>73</sup> Our higher end Southern restaurants are no exception to this pervasive comical

---

<sup>72</sup> Original dialogue in Spanish (in a video for his mother): “Es como una familia. Todos tenemos mucho tiempo conocernos y es un buen lugar a trabajar.” Miguel Torres, video interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, July 9, 2015.

<sup>73</sup> The first time my late grandmother, Eleni “Helen” Amprazis, heard this word was during my time as a UNC undergraduate, at least 10 years ago. She called me from the restaurant to ask what it meant. We have a similar curse word in Greek with the same literal and contextual meaning, which delighted her to no end. My grandmother picked up a lot of Spanish words while working with Roberto.

influence, as evident by the chef's jacket Jennings made for Miguel. Bill Smith of Crook's Corner earned the nickname Chule, for chuleta, or pork chop, from his Mexican friends in his kitchen. It later morphed into Chulegre, a portmanteau of chuleta alegre: happy porkchop. Pointing to his signature chef's belly, Smith says he always thought it given to him for having a porky persona. While he was close, a cook told him it more accurately depicted his pink face, which was the same color as raw pork flesh. "Mean, but it's true," Smith says. "They have a gallows humor about everything."<sup>74</sup>

In the "imagined community" of a kitchen working environment, Ray argues that humor can be equalizing, whereas anger is hierarchal (Ray 2016).<sup>75</sup> For the Lantern cooks, Miguel clearly represents a leader within the hierarchy, but the jokes remain ubiquitous and unforgiving to anyone in any position. Ramiro, who is the main cook on the line, is called the driver. On his birthday last fall, he took the night off to dine at the Lantern, and Javier replaced him on the line. It was a tense moment for Javier, but he was given no sympathy. Miguel uses this joke to elaborate on the strengths of each crew member.

"How they call him the driver, Ramiro. Like you're driving the truck. They say in that position you do long trips. And everyone was making fun of Javier, like, 'Wow, this is your first long trip! How is that gonna end up?' I mean, as soon as you get into the freeway you know if you can do it or not. [laughs] Or maybe just take the first exit. Everybody jokes about how it's hard and you have to do this whole thing and it's a big deal. And how Oscar can do, maybe... potentially... in emergencies, short trips. And it's always a joke, if you ask them about it, it's always like, Ramiro's the driver. But they also put it in a lot of different ways. Like I'm the one driving the truck and I'm the one with all the Mexicans in the back of the truck. Like, putting vegetables from the field. Kind of like that, it's another thing that they play with that kind of thing."<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Bill Smith, Interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, April 1, 2016.

<sup>75</sup> Krishnendu Ray, *The Ethnic Restaurateur*, (Bloomsbury Academic 2016), 145.

<sup>76</sup> Miguel Torres, Interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Carrboro, North Carolina, Oct. 31, 2015.



*Oscar in the middle of telling a joke. Video still by Victoria Bouloubasis (July 2015)*

The cooks joke about nearly everything, including their English. They shout “Shakira!” or “cucaracha!” when soft-shell crabs are out of the fryer. Miguel says they can never say the words “soft shell.” The men use their cheeky humor to also push their own heteronormative boundaries. As Oscar turned to his cohort to declare in Spanglish one evening around five o’clock, “Somos gays después de las cinco y media, guys!”<sup>77</sup> We’re all gay after 5:30. Miguel shakes his head with a grin. “See that? I’m the only gay one here, but I’m the only one who never talks about it!” Their homoerotic behavior extends to a few front of the house gabachos (or gringos) who they have a playful and tactile camaraderie with that is mutual. One blonde male server frequently gets kissy noises from Oscar, and Javier will then joke that every time he passes, it’s as if angels have fallen from the sky. They remarked that one of my male dining companions on my birthday looked like a Mexican telenovela star; Oscar feigns fainting every time he asks

---

<sup>77</sup> Oscar on camera, filmed by Victoria Bouloubasis, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, July 9, 2015.

about him. Kyla Wazana Tompkins argues that the “mouth is a stage” for what she calls “*queer alimentarity*: a space where nonnormative desires can be played out.” (2012)<sup>78</sup> Throughout my career as a food journalist and a shorter one as a restaurant employee, queer alimentarity does not come as a shock.<sup>79</sup>



*Oscar and Ramiro share a laugh. Video still by Victoria Bouloubasis. (July 2015)*

The most revealing joke, however, is an identifier they use for themselves. “Tlacuache!” I first heard it at the end of August, when they invited me for a Sunday supper. The roommates, their names listed on a chore schedule taped to the kitchen wall, were shouting “possum” in Spanish at each other as they prepared to drive out to the produce market. They use this term to riff on how “gringos” think immigrants are invasive species. “It’s just a joke. We’re always joking,” says Javier. The idea of “invasion and succession” in ethnic studies in America refers to the Federal Housing Administration’s discriminatory roots, where in 1938 the group influenced banks to deny

---

<sup>78</sup> Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion*, (New York University Press, 2012) 185.

<sup>79</sup> This homoerotic kitchen dynamic is also described in chef Anthony Bourdain’s *Kitchen Confidential*, (Random House, 2000).

loans to ethnic and black minorities.<sup>80</sup> Without knowing the deep-rooted racism specific to his statement, Javier understands very well what his neighbors may think about him.<sup>81</sup>



*Javier on the Lantern patio. Video still by Victoria Bouloubasis (July 2015)*

---

<sup>80</sup> Tom Hanchett, “A Salad Bowl City,” *The Larder* (Univ. of Georgia Press, 2012) 168.

<sup>81</sup> More in the last chapter.



### CHAPTER 3: Homemade Memories

*“What’s it like waking up in my mom’s house?”*

*- Miguel Torres*

We are perched on high swivel stools and scooted up against the tiled bar at Crook’s Corner, Miguel Torres and I. It’s a Sunday summer night and we’ve both got a cold whiskey drink in our grip as we wait for our supper to arrive. Miguel, the chef de cuisine at Lantern Restaurant, is enjoying a night off. I am simply taking in his company while catching him up on my trip to Mexico. Just two weeks earlier, I stood in his mother’s kitchen in Celaya, Guanajuato, stuffing wet corn masa with thick pulled pork and clapping it against my palms into flat discs, just like Doña Silvia showed me how to do. At this point, I have known Miguel for less than a year. Throughout our many conversations—some formal, with a recorder, and others casual, like tonight’s meal or when I pop into the Lantern kitchen as he works—Miguel maintains his chatty cadence and smart wit. I later realize this persona is constantly shaped by his desire to maintain a welcoming disposition, a polite impression. Miguel is not overly emotive; neither is his mother. On this night, however, I notice his watery eyes as he interrupts me for the first time.

“What’s it like waking up in my mom’s house?” he asks.

I am startled by his tear. Maybe I imagined it. We had talked about his family and about Mexico for at least half an hour. He had already asked me about the food,

asked about his sisters. We talked about Tio Juan scooping up my Greek meatballs with tortilla, and how Tia Alejandra took me to her zumba class, and how Teresa was handling her second pregnancy. Miguel told me what his mother said about me after I left, and I told him how his twelve-year-old cousin never said goodbye in person, so his mom made him call me at midnight before I left. The big family talk was already out of the way. I shared stories, personality traits and quirks of people in the *family*—Miguel’s family—he had not seen in eighteen years. It felt emotional to me, the weight of what that must mean to him. But Miguel laughed and nodded as he asked questions, with no distraught display of emotion. Until now.

“What’s it like waking up in my mom’s house?” he asks. “It smells like Fabuloso,” I reply. It was the first thing I thought of to say, because that thick lavender-scented chemical is what you smell waking up in the Torres home. Later, I realize I may have subconsciously answered that way to diffuse any discomfort or sadness. Miguel laughs. We both have a mental image of the neon purple cleaning liquid with the bubbly Fabuloso logo gleaming on the bottle. “Your mom cleans a lot,” I continue. “*A lot.*” He laughs even harder this time. “Oh yeah. Yep. I remember. And all those kids now, huh?” “So many,” I reply.

It was Andrea Reusing’s *New York Times* best-selling cookbook, *Cooking in the Moment: A Year Of Seasonal Recipes* (2011) that inspired me to choose Miguel’s story for my graduate research. There, Andrea devotes an entire section to “Family Meal,” where she described when and what the staff eats—on shift or for special occasions. Andrea writes, “When we plan ahead, we really feast, and the fare tends to be Mexican,

since that is where almost everyone in the kitchen grew up.” Later, Andrea introduces Miguel:

“Miguel Torres runs the kitchen at Lantern—by day he is in the kitchen cooking, tasting, and teaching, and he’s there nearly every night, too, managing the details and chaos of service. For his thirtieth birthday, we made an epic ceviche of fat scallops, shrimp, and blue crab served with freshly fried tostadas; nearly fifty pounds were needed to counteract the beer and fuel the dancing. When Miguel moved here from his hometown, Celaya, near Mexico City, he was eighteen years old, had spoken English mainly in school, and knew only one person. One hundred friends showed up at the party—his “double quinceañera” to fond coworkers—and as usual he made sure that no one left hungry or “underserved.””

With this passage, Reusing unveiled a bit of the cloaked conversations about immigration that swirl around American restaurant kitchens. She includes a recipe for “Miguel Torres’s Carnitas” and briefly alludes to something amiss in this immigration tale:

“On the few nights that he is not at Lantern, Miguel cooks Mexican at home. He has not seen his family since moving to North Carolina in 1999, and the goal of his home cooking is to make his dishes taste as close to his mother’s and grandmother’s as possible with the ingredients he can get here. He thinks that he is getting close with these carnitas.”

I ask Miguel in conversation about this recipe. He says he does not often resort to that recipe at home, but that “Andrea wanted a Mexican recipe” for her book. There is value in the inclusion of Miguel’s culinary craft in this bestselling cookbook. Still, the chapter dedicated to his family recipe represents a common tactic when classifying immigrants within our food worlds. Immigrant food narratives are often overly sentimentalized regarding the longing for home or preservation of an ‘ethnic’ food tradition.

Concurrently, these same works usually emphasize the immigrant’s contribution to society. But it is still very much shared through a white American view of Mexico. For example, Celaya is not particularly close to Mexico City, and the section implies that

Miguel may be familiar with the capital city. In fact, he is not, and what he knows of it he learns by perusing Mexico City chefs and restaurants on Twitter. (He says if he were forced to go back, he would consider becoming a pastry chef there. He has noticed, albeit digitally, a dearth of high level pastry cooks.)<sup>82</sup>

### **Celaya Hill**

Celaya is a city of nearly 400,000 people in the state of Guanajuato located 125 miles northwest of Mexico City.<sup>83</sup> Reliant on agriculture production, the town has transitioned into one where, beyond the fields, plastics and food production industries augment the agricultural economy. A good job in this realm usually requires a college education or many years on the factory floor. While traveling in and out of Celaya by bus, I noticed billboards for Monsanto-licensed chiles, in which the peppers aren't identified by name, but by the company's scientific seed number. Large industrial complexes for food manufacturers like "ACT II" popcorn are located in the outskirts of the city. Globalization has influenced eating habits as well. A man named Francisco, who also worked at Crook's Corner, now mans a chicharron stand in one of Celaya's central mercados. The flat sheets of pork rind that comes in bulk for his shop are imported from Alabama and North Carolina, he says. It's cheaper that way. As in most of Mexico, Coca-Cola dominates the dinner table, with prolific advertisements on television—including savvy product placement on popular shows, in magazines and on posters in every tienda.

---

<sup>82</sup> His mother, Silvia, has never traveled to Mexico City. His brother, Juan, recently did for a work training. He manages an assembly line at a plastics factory in Celaya that manufactures bottles for popular motor oil and other brands.

<sup>83</sup> Hannah Gill, *Going to Carolina del Norte*, (University Center for International Studies at UNC, 2006), 33.

Coca-Cola is cheap, too, and often a more economical choice than the ten-gallon jugs of spring water every family must purchase. The Torres family drinks more Coke than water, and often asked me why I drank so much water instead.

Miguel is one of among many immigrants from Celaya to Carrboro, the majority of who are food workers. He and his peers arrived in the late 1990s. Among them: every butcher on staff at Cliff's Meat Market; current and former cooks of Crook's Corner; Yadira, head of pastry at Lantern; and Ramiro, Lantern's 13-year veteran line cook and also a kitchen employee at Top of the Hill.<sup>84</sup> Luis Ortega, former cook at Crook's Corner, says he and his friends would call Chapel Hill "Celaya Hill" when they lived here. In her extensive research with UNC students here and in Celaya, anthropologist Hannah Gill has detailed why the majority of Carrboro's Mexican immigrants come from Celaya:

"Even though goods and services are cheaper in Mexico than in the United States, people find it difficult to earn a livable wage working in factories or fields. In Celaya, a day's work for twenty pesos will pay for one doctor's visit, three days of gas for cooking, a pound of ground pork, two to three pounds of tomatoes, or a family's drinking water for a week. A pair of plastic Mexican shoes costs 200 pesos or ten days of work, while a pair of the currently popular New Balance tennis shoes costs 450 pesos, or over three weeks of labor. Most families of agricultural laborers cannot afford luxuries like new shoes, meat and clean water." (2006)<sup>85</sup>

I went to visit Celaya largely in the hopes of learning more about Miguel. I wanted to learn more about the experience of families of migrants who remain in the homeland and who also miss loved ones that have established a life elsewhere. And I wanted to see the effects of remittances sent back to Mexico, which is a considerable portion of the money earned by immigrants. U.S. immigrant workers officially sent \$56

---

<sup>84</sup> During my research, I learned that a handful of my long-time friends from Mexico who had always told me they were from Guanajuato, the capital, are actually from Celaya. It is similar to me telling people I am from Winston-Salem, N.C., a more well-known city, than from Clemmons, its suburb where I actually grew up.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

billion back home in 2014. Mexicans accounted for sending \$24 billion back to Mexico.<sup>86</sup>

When Miguel left for North Carolina, his family needed more income. They lived in a small apartment in a poor section of town. On a walk into the center of Celaya with Silvia, she stopped and remembered “this is the street where Miguel was born!” She showed me the home, sandwiched in a block of houses like most homes in Celaya. It looked much more narrow than their current home, and was painted in a dark color. This is the home Miguel left. His mother told me that, at the time, it wasn’t a safe area of town. The Torres family doesn’t talk much of their lifestyle before Miguel left. As the oldest of four siblings, Miguel assisted Doña Silvia with taking care of the household. With the help of her own parents and sisters, Silvia raised her children in a matriarchal household structured with orderly routines, including cooking for the family and preparing food that she sold. As the oldest child, Miguel began to help his mother as early as age 9. Miguel was ten years old when his father “was completely out of the picture.” . While Silvia went to work a late shift at a store, Miguel finished baking the large cake orders for her side business. She taught him how to measure flour and sugar and to time the oven just right, using recipes from a neighbor’s borrowed cookbook. “We never had spices and things like that, like I would like to have now. Like I *do* have now,” recalls Miguel. “It was more like cooking because we had to eat, not cooking because we like to cook. What you can afford kind of thing.”<sup>87</sup>

“As a child, he was always by my side,” Silvia says. “Supporting me since he was a kid. He would go to the market for me when I asked. He would bring the tortillas, or

---

<sup>86</sup> World Bank press release: “International Migration At All-Time High.” Dec. 18, 2015.

<sup>87</sup> Miguel Torres, interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Carrboro, NC, Oct. 31, 2015.

household items. He did everything, very young. Very young because we were in need and he had to help.”<sup>88</sup>

Today Miguel provides his mother a mesada, or monthly allowance to support her, and from what I noticed in Celaya, his two younger sisters. Iveth is married with a son and another baby on the way. While she and her husband own property and live in a nearby city, they stayed for nearly a year in Silvia’s house because of a temporary transfer with the husband’s job. Iveth earns her own money with a mobile nail salon business, and was frequently off to see clients. Her mother’s nails are adorned with rhinestones and flower designs created by Iveth. I tell Miguel about his mother’s nails, and he is pleasantly surprised: he doesn’t recall her getting ‘dolled up’ while he was a child. Today, she still works even though Miguel provides enough if she chose not to. Silvia says she works because she would get depressed otherwise. She enjoys taking care of people, and she makes and sells sandwiches at a busy bus station in nearby Villagran, where she manages a few shifts at the tienda inside.

---

<sup>88</sup> Original dialogue in Spanish: “Como niño el siempre estuvo al lado de mi. Es de, apoyandome desde niño. Iba al mercado para el mandado. Iba a traer tortillas, al mandado de alabastros. Todo hizo eso muy pequeño. Muy pequeño porque la necesidad que teníamos tenia que ayudar.” Silvia Torres Moreno, interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico, July 2015.



*Silvia Torres at work. Villagran, Guanajuato. Photo by Victoria Bouloubasis (July 2015)*

While Miguel was young, he also helped her make gorditas and tacos to sell outside of a factory during lunch shifts. Today, she makes large quantities of food and normally gives them away. During the summer, neighbors stop in for bags of her gorditas or salsas and insist on giving her a few pesos. “I don’t think a lot of things that she does is economical anymore,” Miguel says. “I think she tries to duplicate things that she learned from her mom. So whenever she cooks something, she makes big amounts. And sends them to the uncles, or just people.”<sup>89</sup> Silvia says she does it as a way of paying forward. “I like to share with people. Why? Because I also had a big need once. So now I like to share what I have.”<sup>90</sup>

Like in many matriarchal homes in Mexico, the Torres women—Miguel’s aunts, mostly—sell snacks like chicharron doused in Valentina hot sauce outside their verandas. Strangers and acquaintances pop in to buy a treat and share a little gossip. Silvia raised

---

<sup>89</sup> Miguel Torres, Interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Carrboro, NC, Oct. 31, 2015.

<sup>90</sup> Original dialogue in Spanish: “Me gusta mucho, es de, compartir con la gente. Por que? Porque yo también tuve mucha necesidad. Entonces tengo que compartir lo que yo tengo.” Silvia Torres Moreno, Interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico, July 2015.



four children with work like this and a home cake-baking business. Miguel served as she says, as her “right hand.” “He was always my right hand. And he still is,” she told me. Miguel never recalls her pining for a partner or worrying the children about their future. Instead, she used the kitchen to teach Miguel the very skills he has used to create a successful career in a country where he doesn’t have full rights.

### **Dimmed memories**

“I vaguely remember when he left, because it was so many years ago now,” says Iveth Guadalupe Torres, Miguel’s sister. “He was supposed to come back for my quinceañera, but I’m still waiting!” She laughs. Iveth is 29 years old. When talking about Miguel, his siblings express their recollection and fondness for their brother in a subdued way. As previously stated, most members of the Torres family are not emotive. Miguel and Iveth are the most animated of the group, shooting off clever quips and jokes. Everyone in the family speaks in a fast, nearly mumbled cadence, but Miguel and Iveth share personality traits. When I tell Miguel this after my first trip, he is surprised and disagrees. “Iveth is crazy!” he jokes. Iveth also raises an eyebrow. She remembers Miguel being very strict when taking care of them as children. She points to her almond-shaped eyes in a video I took of her in the kitchen last summer. “You see how my eyes are like this? It’s because Miguel used to pull my hair so tight when fixing it they stretched back!” All three siblings, Juan, Iveth and Teresa, liken Miguel to his mother. Both demonstrate strong discipline, underlaid with love. Being the young caretaker for his three siblings after school, Miguel was in charge of putting dinner on the table and getting them to bed. In Celaya, Juan and Iveth laugh as they share memories of their chef

brother cooking them pasta without salt, and then forcing them to finish their food or they would be punished. Miguel laughed, too, when I relayed the story to him, but he didn't remember it happening.

Silvia clearly remembers her son's announcement to leave for the States. "Miguel says to me, 'I want to go to the United States. To have a better life and to give you a better life. I want to build you a house.' And he did it."<sup>91</sup> Silvia's youngest sister, Alejandra Torres Moreno (or Ale), is only two years older than Miguel, and says their close relationship felt like being siblings. She remembers crying when he left because he looked too "chiquito" or little to go away alone. She worried about his journey across the border. She also tears up talking about his being absent so long. "Like, for me, since it's so far away it's like you'll never see him again. And thinking he'll live a much more difficult life in a place where you're not there. Yes, to be so alone. There's no one there. I mean, it's not what you think. Well, that's what I was thinking. And for me not to be there."<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>91</sup> Original dialogue in Spanish: "Me dice Miguel, "Yo quiero ir a los Estados Unidos." "Para tener una vida mejor. Quiero darte una vida mejor a ti. Conseguirte una casa." Y lo logro." Silvia Torres Moreno, interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico. July 2015.

<sup>92</sup> Original dialogue in Spanish: "Osea, para mi como que sea muy lejos es como que nunca lo vas a volver a ver. Si. Y como va a vivir una vida muy dificil donde no estas tu. Si, es tan solo. No hay nadie. Osea no es lo que piensas. Bueno, yo lo pienso asi. Que no estas alli" Alejandra Torres Moreno, interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico, Dec. 28, 2015.



*Sisters Alejandra and Silvia Torres Moreno. Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico. Photo by Victoria Bouloubasis  
(December 2015)*

For Miguel, Celaya is a distant memory. I once visited him in the Lantern kitchen and he had a UNC student magazine ready to show me. In it, photographs of Celaya depicted a strong North Carolina connection that surprised Miguel. A photo of a bus station showed a list of places in North Carolina where the bus would directly take workers—2,000 miles away from Greensboro, Burlington, Durham and Chapel Hill. Another photo depicted a man in a UNC baseball cap. When I arrived at nearby Villagran after the Torres family picked me up from the airport, I stood in the town square shocked as I noticed a man in an North Carolina State University Wolfpack T-shirt walk by. On a subsequent trip to Leon, a city an hour away where the Guanajuato airport is, a woman selling churros in the town square wore a Carolina T-shirt and a nearby store sold a Tar Heel beanie that was clearly a knockoff. It read in Carolina blue and white:

CARLOLINA.

Miguel's family does not know anyone in Celaya with Chapel Hill ties. In contrast, the two employees from Crook's whom I met, and who are unrelated, knew of several families, including the Martinez family who mainly work at Cliff's. When visiting them, I met a neighbor who worked at Breadman's restaurant. Even in Carrboro, Miguel doesn't convene with Celayenses beyond his place of work. He didn't meet Tolo Martinez of Cliff's Meat Market until a screening of the *Un Buen Carnicero* documentary at Lantern in early 2015. Both men arrived from Celaya to Carrboro in 1998 and work mere blocks away from each other. Whereas Tolo knows and is related to many of the Celayenses in Carrboro, Miguel only knows those individuals he works with at the Lantern. This behavior mirrors the family dynamic of each family in Celaya. Tolo's sister, Lucia, for example is a self-proclaimed "andariega" or wanderer. She explores the state on long drives with her husband every weekend. They live in a very modest home compared to that of the Torres family; it is slowly under construction. Lucia is unapologetic for her modest lifestyle. She says she can't take things with her when she dies, and wants to spend money on trips to see new things and meet new people. Silvia, Miguel's mother, says she doesn't like to travel, although her "greatest dream"<sup>93</sup> is to visit her son. The Torres family dynamic is incredibly insular. During Christmas, Silvia declined an invitation to spend a dinner with her son at her daughter-in-law's parents' home. She prefers that people come to her and attributes that to being the oldest daughter of 13 siblings.

Both Miguel and Tolo warned me of possible danger in Celaya. The narcos, or drug lords, are slowly gaining a presence in the small city. Traditionally, petty crime and

---

<sup>93</sup> She used the words "mejor ilusión" in Spanish.

police corruption is an issue there and throughout Mexico. But some regions, especially in the north or in rural Oaxaca, are plagued by murder, violent crime, and femicides at the hands of narcotraffickers. Many in Celaya are worried about it gaining traction there. One person, who wished to remain anonymous, recounted a story to me of someone she knew who had his own business. In the middle of the night, a man associated with a drug gang appeared at his home and threatened to kill a family member if he didn't give a cut of his business to them on a monthly basis. The man closed his business and fled. Many commonplace home-based businesses, like taco stands, are also being targeted by narcos. I asked one of Miguel's family members if the new taco stand across the street in their neighborhood might become a target. They suspected yes, and said many of these newer ventures are people, who open businesses in their own home, attract the attention of narcos who threaten them with violence so that they pay a large monthly fee as protection. For this reason, I didn't bring my camera while walking in the neighborhood and in town, at the request of the Torres family. It could have easily been stolen, but another risk was to the Torres family—knowing an American who could have money.

In June 2008, under the presidential administrations of George W. Bush in the U.S. and Felipe Calderon in Mexico, the United States signed the Mérida Initiative into law. This promise led to the allocation of \$1.5 billion U.S. dollars to Mexico from 2008-2010. The plan, considered a cooperative effort between the two countries to combat drug trafficking and smuggling of firearms across the border, funneled into the Mexican military and police to curtail and ideally halt the violence caused by drug cartels. According to the U.S. Department of State, the plan is “based on principles of common and shared responsibility, mutual trust, and respect for sovereign independence.”

Critics, like Mexico's ex-minister of exterior relations Rosario Green, call it a "papelito," no more than a little piece of paper among many in an attempt to downplay the entanglement of American and Mexican politics and profit, at the expense of their most vulnerable people. The plan requires \$73.5 million (15 percent of the funds) to implement judicial reform efforts against human rights abuses. According to the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, Witness for Peace, the U.S. State Department withheld \$26 million in Mérida funds in 2010 until the Mexican state passed human rights reforms to their constitution and the Military Code of Justice. Mexico has yet to pass either measure. An estimated 90 percent of weapons used by Mexican drug cartels come from the United States. Witness for Peace insists that the Mérida Initiative and NAFTA have exacerbated Mexico's problem with poverty while ignoring the cause of drug trafficking and violence rooted in America. Many of Mexico's chronic social issues, including drugs, are a result of a complicit American infrastructure, and foundational to why so many citizens flee the country.

### **The uncertainty of a new place**

Miguel maintains an active connection to his family through commerce. Each month he sends packages to his family with an individual who is authorized to travel back and forth between North Carolina and Mexico. This man drives from Carrboro to Celaya, delivering gifts and goods to family members from immigrants in the Triangle.<sup>94</sup> In October, Miguel spent nearly \$400 on the shipping fee alone, for a box filled with

---

<sup>94</sup> Miguel Torres, interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Carrboro, North Carolina, Oct. 31, 2015.

iPads, toys, face paint, books and even a chocolate-spouting fountain for his mother. In his words:

“It’s all about it comes from El Norte. It’s not so much about what you send, it’s coming from you from the United States. It makes it a lot more special.

It was a Saturday night, I worked really late like usually. I come home and the boxes are everywhere. Thirty boxes. I started opening things and labeling things. And then it was like 4 or 5 in the morning. The man came around 9 to pick them up.

They feel really special when I send something from here. One of the reasons I’m here is because I want to be able to do things like this. It makes me happy. And then they are crazy happy too. I don’t think about the money that much. I work like a crazy person, I make a decent amount of money and they’re my family.”<sup>95</sup>

I noticed in my travels to Mexico that Miguel sent his mother notes and cards from his past employers—such as Chef Brett Jennings of Elaine’s—as well as photographs of his encounters with celebrity chefs. One such photo features Miguel and his Elaine’s co-workers with chef Mario Batali. Silvia didn’t know anything about Batali. She tucks these photos into the same album that includes snapshots of her son as a baby. When I returned to Chapel Hill, I asked Miguel why he sent those important career memories to his mother. Of course, he wants his mother to take pride in his work, but he also added, “you always think you’re going to go back.” Mexico was a “safe place” to keep these important images.<sup>96</sup>

This recalls the compelling narrative of the *casa vacia*, meaning empty house. (Shutika 2011)<sup>97</sup> For many Mexican migrants in America, the idea of home is rooted in Mexico, despite the real possibility of waiting years to return, and for some, never

---

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Miguel Torres, Interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Chapel Hill, NC, Sept. 10, 2015.

<sup>97</sup> Deborah Shutika, *Beyond the Borderlands: Migration and Belonging in the United States and Mexico* (Berkeley: U of California, 2011)

returning. Un-inhabited homes in Mexican neighborhoods are fully furnished and maintained by family members. Photographs on the walls are updated, lawns are manicured, and new television sets are installed, awaiting the owner. This preserves the notion that someone is *there*, that someone still lives *there*. The house maintains the spirit of its humans and a sense of home. Tolo Martinez has such a home in Celaya, around the corner from his mother's house. He hasn't been back in twenty years, but it's a place he plans to furnish so that American visitors like his son can go to stay. Tolo's brother, Pedro, also worked at Cliff's Meat Market, but decided to return to Celaya with his American-born children and new wife. He had his own *casa vacia* to go back to, adjacent to his mother's home. Torres hasn't returned home in nearly eighteen years. The concept of *casa vacia* is apparent in Miguel's mother's photo albums, keeping memories safe for his undetermined, almost mythical return home some day. For Miguel, this concept was once a possibility, but is no longer a goal.

### **Confronting emotions**

Miguel built a home and, in essence, an entire new life for his family with his Lantern earnings. He wanted to ensure his mother's hard work on his behalf wasn't performed in vain. The house that his American money built is a three-story structure painted a bright cerulean blue. It towers above the other homes in their colonia. Tile floors, a dining room set with tall-backed chairs, and endless toys strewn about reflect a home more abundant than the childhood home Miguel remembers. When I returned from Christmas in Mexico—that included family celebrations with pots of bubbling pozole and pieces of a freshly butchered goat stewed in banana leaf—Miguel asked if I had been



present for King's Day on January 6. (I was not; I had left Celaya a week earlier to see a friend in Oaxaca.) He seemed disturbed about some photos his sisters posted on Facebook that showed the abundance of toys that the children received for Día de Reyes. "It's weird to see that stuff. I didn't grow up like that. I didn't have such big deal celebrations." He wore a look of resentment on his face, which made me think about something he said in an interview earlier: "I *think* they respect me." Miguel is the main provider for a family he hasn't seen in nearly twenty years. He deeply loves and cares for them, and they continue to motivate all he does each day. But he is often very tired. The physical and emotional demands of restaurant labor are taxing. A life that revolves 24-7 around work can be mentally exhausting. Miguel often laments that he has no time for online dating, for example. Or when he does, he ends up wasting his time on a "weird" date when he would rather be at home resting. At the beginning of this project, Miguel communicated with me regularly and guaranteed I could come to the restaurant whenever I wanted to, at just a day's notice. We met for coffee or drinks. But as time evolved, so did the demands at Lantern. Miguel was excited to make carnitas for me, from the cookbook, and show me just the right amount of Coca-Cola to drizzle into the mix. He liked how that ingredient adds both a Mexican and Southern touch to the delicious pork. The entire staff was excited, too, as it was a group effort and ensured a hearty staff lunch before dinner service. But on the morning of our scheduled gathering, Miguel seemed rushed. He was feeling the increasing pressure of managing both the "back of the house" and the "front of the house"<sup>98</sup> and described this as one of the most stressful moments of his career.

---

<sup>98</sup> In restaurant lingo, "back of the house" refers to staff who work in the kitchen as chefs, cooks, dishwashers and bussers. "Front of the house" refers to managers, servers and hosts who communicate

As the morning evolved, however, and the carnitas simmered, Miguel grew calmer. When making the gorditas to accompany the meat, he turned to me and asked how his mother did it. He used a tortilla press to flatten the masa, but I showed him an easier way Dona Silvia taught me: using the flat bottom of a large plastic plate. He eschewed the bulky tortilla press for his mother's method. It was the first time where I noticed he wasn't in full command of a cooking task he was performing, and less at ease. I thought about the carnitas recipe in Reusing's cookbook, and Miguel's remembered world of Mexico and its layers of deep complexities.

## CHAPTER 4: The Politics of Fear And Racial Capitalism

*“But part of what I know is that there is the burden of living among Dreamers, and there is the extra burden of your country telling you the Dream is just, noble, and real, and you are crazy for seeing the corruption and smelling the sulfur.”*

*- Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me*

*“When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”*

*- Donald Trump*

*“Mexicanos, al grito de guerra...”*

*(Mexicans, to the warrior cry...)*

*- Mexico national anthem*

North Carolina is home to the fastest growing Latino population in the country, faster than any border state. In leading an all-immigrant staff in Lantern’s kitchen, Miguel deftly navigates the complex dynamics of class, privilege and legal status that play out in a changing South. Most food service staff works behind the kitchen doors. But Miguel dignifies his chef de cuisine position in the public view, all while his reality as an undocumented immigrant remains unseen. “I feel like now I am in probably one of the most difficult times of my life,” he says in response to the current political climate. “Everything was working out so nicely. And now this whole immigration thing, the government, the state government and all... It’s working against you. So, it makes me feel like, is it worth it that I’m still doing this?”<sup>99</sup>

In November, President Barack Obama announced a new executive order regarding immigration, which proposed temporary administrative relief for undocumented parents

---

<sup>99</sup> Miguel Torres, interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Carrboro, NC, Oct. 31, 2015

of citizen-born children. Within minutes of the president's televised announcement, North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory published a statement on his Facebook page. After declaring the order "unconstitutional" and vowing to work with Congress on a plan for reform, the Republican governor concluded: "I'm extremely concerned about the potentially negative impact of this executive order on our public schools, health services and public safety."

In March, President Barack Obama posted on his own Facebook page a story of a man in rural Virginia who bounced back from the recession and kept his bakery running despite the odds. The message concluded, "Brian is exactly the kind of American I was talking about at the end of my State of the Union Address. Hard-working. Optimistic. Someone who doesn't seek attention, because he's busy doing the work this country needs doing – all with a stubborn and quintessentially American refusal to let others down."<sup>100</sup> The irony in this statement is that more "hard-working" and "optimistic" immigrants have been deported by Obama's administration than by any other in U.S. history. To this date he has deported at least 2.5 million people.

This irony is not lost on Miguel and his peers, though it is on many Americans who do not concern themselves with immigration policy—their lives don't depend on it. A polarizing American perception of working-class immigrants positions them as "others" on the fringe of society. A physical border separates two Americas, and the public and political obsession with that physical separation has encouraged a divisive mentality between working-class Americans and undocumented immigrants. However, the parallels of the native-born, white Southern working class and new southerners, like Miguel, are robust and frequent. Miguel openly speaks of the negative public perceptions he

---

<sup>100</sup> From the Facebook page of President Barack Obama, March 14, 2016.

confronts each day. As evidence of his potential model citizenship, he must constantly prove he is a “hard worker” and “not a criminal.”

### **There is no line**

A common misconception in America is that immigrants who come here illegally have not taken the proper steps to “get in line” and complete a process of naturalization or citizenship. The reality is that, for many, there is no path to citizenship and the process is subjective, depending upon the individual’s country of origin. For example, an immigrant from China, the Philippines, Mexico, and India must wait the longest for a visa. Isabel Guzman, an immigration lawyer in Durham, North Carolina, confirms the difficulties immigrants face, especially in these four countries: “I have consulted with people who have waited 16-18 years, and finally... the visa is now available. But due to the long wait time, lots of things have occurred in that person’s life, which now makes them ineligible, such as expedited removal, or multiple unlawful entries, or getting married.” She explains that for many, including Mexicans, a permanent barrier exists. If a person enters unlawfully and stays longer than one year, departs the United States, and then re-enters the country unlawfully, the permanent bar is triggered. In that case, the individual must remain outside the United States for 10 years, and then can only apply to be admitted with what Guzman calls a “waiver.”<sup>101</sup> “For many, filing a waiver is not possible,” says Guzman. “To get a waiver approved, you have to have a qualifying relative (QR)—a spouse or parent who is a U.S. citizen or permanent resident. Lots of people don’t have a QR. So waiting out of the U.S. for 10 years becomes the only option.”

---

<sup>101</sup> Isabel Guzman, email interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, April 13, 2016.

For Mexicans to get to the United States, obtaining a visa requires a substantial amount of money and proof of income. Furthermore, individuals have a better chance if they prove there is enough money in their bank account, so that there is no need to stay and work in the U.S. This limits eligibility to older people in Mexico with substantial income or savings. Miguel is hoping his mother, who is in her 50s, can obtain a tourist visa so she may visit him in North Carolina. Despite his talent and tenure in the kitchen, Miguel cannot obtain a seasonal or more permanent working visa because it does not exist for his work. Seasonal visas, like the H2A or H2B visa, are for farm work and other agricultural tasks. Specialized visas require a college degree. Of course, there is a cap on each individual visa, which also makes it a limiting and prohibitive option for most immigrants.

“If the public policy is to reunite families, is to bolster our economy, then immigration laws are truly broken,” says Guzman. “The wait times only serve to fracture families even further, and as many people become desperate after many years of separation, they are tempted to enter the U.S. unlawfully. So actually, the laws encourage illegal immigration. There would be no illegal immigration if the means for legal immigration were more viable and realistic.”<sup>102</sup>

### **Silence and anonymity**

While the liberal elite in America remains largely silent on the issue of immigration, workers like Miguel are nearly forced into anonymity due to the politics of fear in our nation. It may be more obvious to someone working in restaurants that a steady undocumented immigrant class supports the American system of food service. Stories

---

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* For more statistics on visas and other immigration-related policy, visit the U.S. Visas Bulletin at [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov).

about immigrant restaurant workers appear in the national press from time to time, although most of the published research appears as statistics. For example, data from 2014 reveals 25.7 million foreign-born people work in the U.S. labor force. (There are 11 million undocumented inhabitants in this country.) Hispanics accounted for 48.3 percent of the foreign-born labor force. Foreign-born workers were more likely to work in service jobs rather than the professional, managerial and office positions of their native-born counterparts. They also earn far less. The median weekly income of foreign-born full-time wage and salary workers was \$664 in 2014, compared with \$820 for native-born workers.<sup>103</sup> In the foreign-born group, we can assume a majority of restaurant workers exist, and that they are largely undocumented. Stories remain untold because of the threat of legal retaliation, both against the worker either through detainment and/or deportation, and the employer through fines and penalties.

I interviewed *Washington Post* journalist Roberto A. Ferdman, whose coverage of the economics of restaurants and restaurant labor includes immigration issues. This summer, the newspaper's Wonkblog published his story, "The crippling problem restaurant-goers haven't noticed but chefs are freaking out about." Ferdman describes a constant problem in the industry: culinary school graduates enter the workforce to find low-wage kitchen jobs that place them at the bottom of the line, forcing them to work their way up. Rejecting this grueling path, many are quitting early, disgruntled. In the second half of the story, Ferdman describes a "subtle but significant change" as Mexican immigrants who have, "proved eager and talented cooks," are increasingly not choosing

---

<sup>103</sup> All data provided by a news release, "[Labor Force Characteristics of Foreign-born Workers](#)," issued by the U.S. Dept. of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics on May 21, 2015.

to come to America.<sup>104</sup> “By 2012, net migration to Mexico was already zero, or even negative, meaning that more Mexicans were moving out than moving in.”<sup>105</sup> In 2008 the Pew Hispanic Center estimated twenty percent of the country’s more than 2.5 million chefs and cooks were undocumented immigrants.<sup>106</sup> George Mason University economics professor, Tyler Cowen, substantiates this data: “This sector is, as anyone in it will tell you, kept afloat by immigrants, especially Latinos.”<sup>107</sup>

‘Subtle’ is a poor, inaccurate choice of words and I tweeted Ferdman, as such. Ferdman replied to my tweet, reminding me that much of the public—or at least his readership—hasn’t worked in a restaurant. Even so, it is hard to imagine that restaurant customers have missed that the majority of kitchen workers are non-white and/or immigrant. Ferdman and I later discussed how difficult it is to find statistical data about undocumented immigrants in restaurant kitchens, let alone personal narratives. “If you haven’t worked in the restaurant industry, you probably haven’t had a good sense of what goes on,” he reiterated. “It’s in the best interest of restaurants to let the diners not know of these problems. These are things they would never share with diners.”<sup>108</sup>

In the worlds of fine dining, I can identify only a handful of high-profile chefs who have been vocal about immigrant workers and, consequently, about America’s broken immigration system. Anthony Bourdain has spoken openly about this issue for at least

---

<sup>104</sup> Roberto A. Ferdman, “The crippling problem restaurant-goers haven’t noticed but chefs are freaking out about.” *The Washington Post*, Aug. 12, 2015.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Roberto Ferdman, phone interview with Victoria Bouloubasis,



five years, and even more so since Donald Trump began to promote his virulent anti-immigration views in the current presidential campaign.

Andrea Reusing has also spoken in public forums about farmworker rights. In November, she shared the James Beard Award Foundation stage with celebrity chef Jose Andres, who halted construction of one of his restaurants that was being built in a Trump property in Washington, D.C. The talk focused on agriculture with an emphasis on farmworker rights. Following the event, a news piece noted: “During the panel, Reusing also mentioned that her kitchens rely on immigrant labor.”<sup>109</sup> While speaking about the injustices faced by migrant farmworkers, she also noted the presence of immigrant labor in professional kitchens, “In general, undocumented workers allows us to have a restaurant industry.”<sup>110</sup> In a *Bit & Grain* piece, journalist Sandra Davidson writes that, “Reusing believes human rights issues in the food system will eventually be impossible to ignore, but wonders, ‘How long does it take, and how many people are going to have to suffer in the process?’” Davidson included Reusing’s quote, ‘I think the foodie moment is now waking up and looking at how inequality really affects every part of the food system and visa [sic] versa.’”<sup>111</sup> These are powerful words for a well-known chef to share with the public, as is the more subtle narrative regarding the contribution and artistry of immigrant voices she included in her cookbook. In the end, Reusing was unable to participate in this project and denied my requests for an interview

---

<sup>109</sup> Gillian Speiser, “Chefs Must Be the Public Voice for Farmers, Say Celebrity Cooks: Andrea Reusing and José Andrés sound battle cry at Beard Conference,” *About Food*, Nov. 10, 2015

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Sandra Davidson, “Farmworkers in North Carolina’s Local Food Movement,” *Bit & Grain*, Oct. 2015

During the civil rights movement, writes historian Angela Jill Cooley, “the struggle that Southern cities undertook to reconcile eating and drinking in public places reveals the complicated merger of various value systems in a diverse urban environment.” (2013: 252)<sup>112</sup> In a post civil rights area, where we have moved beyond the issue of different races sharing public eating spaces, the South still encounters daily discrimination in these spaces related to gender, sexuality and immigration status.

### **Perpetual victimhood and racial capitalism**

In her analysis of the historical relationship between employers and domestic workers in the American South, Rebecca Sharpless argues that the “inherently asymmetrical” relationship was never equal and “everyday actions both control and oppose.”<sup>113</sup> Cooks were valued by their white employers for being “clean” and “honest,” while they expressed uncertainty about their own identity and worth in the world. Quoting Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, “the initiative in defining the personal situation always belongs to the white man.”<sup>114</sup> Similarly, the labor hierarchy in restaurants is still rooted in an inherent power dynamic such that staff seldom stand on an equal footing. Restaurants have long commodified minority labor and the products of that labor—skills, recipes, teamwork—has been bought and sold.<sup>115</sup> The racial politics of food is a central issue in the growing field of food studies, including the symbolic and human connections between the table and the hands that feed us. The physical bodies behind

---

<sup>112</sup> Angela Jill Cooley, “The Customer is Always White,” *The Larder*, (University of Georgia Press, 2013), 240-272

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* 129.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* 134.

<sup>115</sup> Nancy Leong, “Racial Capitalism,” *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 126, No. 8 (June 2013)

food labor are real people who live and love and yearn and dream. The inherent racial capitalism in our restaurant structure, however, commodifies minorities—immigrant or not—in the Southern culinary experience.

On Lantern’s website, a list of impressive alumni cooks, farmers, and food entrepreneurs reflect an important culinary ancestral tree. Miguel is an important member of this culinary legacy. In fact, his name sits atop this list as Lantern’s chef de cuisine, yet despite his elevated position, Miguel remains in a state of legal limbo in which he can’t technically own a business, and, in some ways, his own story.

### **An evolving fear**

Most work about undocumented labor is written from a historical perspective largely focused on the economics of labor, border politics, and the history of migrant workers. The use of anonymous voices in these texts raises the question—is this the collaborator’s choice or rather a paternalistic standard for marginalizing immigrant voices? I frequently encounter the phrase used by scholars and journalists, “giving someone a voice,” when that someone *already* has one. However, much of this decision can be a result of an increasingly fearful political climate, and it is a notion I have learned to grapple with even when someone is empowered to share his or her story publicly. I spoke with chef Bill Smith to further understand his willingness to speak out and the permission to do so by his staff. The relationships he has developed with past and current cooks are an astounding example of the sincerity of an employer. His conversations about them—and with them—foreground their courage in confronting a hostile political situation everyday. Smith has participated in several interviews about his views on immigration. He has sponsored three immigrant families from Mexico, when it was legally possible to do so

under Reagan's amnesty policy. One of those families is also from Celaya. He is the godfather to many of the children of his Mexican staff. And he employs practical tactics to help them out. He makes sure his employees' children have passports, and considers how to secure employees' bank accounts in the case of deportation. I asked two bankers, who wished to remain anonymous, about the financial implications of deportation. A Wells Fargo loan officer has known many Latinos who vanish due to deportation. It is uncommon, says the teller who is Latino/a, for Latino men to include a spouse on their bank account. They suggest that immigrants remember their PIN numbers and include another person on their account to access funds in case of deportation. They recommend leaving an extra debit card at home so money can be retrieved from the ATM and wired back to the person in his or her home country. If an account isn't used within five years, it becomes inactive and inaccessible. Wells Fargo will not, under any circumstances, send money to another bank in another country. In contrast, a banker from a local Latino credit union says a deported person can verify their identity with an official "notario" or lawyer and open a new bank account, from any bank, in their home country. For a \$15 dollar fee, the credit union will transfer money to the new account. The banker told me that they have processed one such transaction.

Attorney Isabel Guzman explains that Durham is considered a "safe zone." Local police authorities only act when there is a federal directive from I.C.E. "You know my husband. He knows a lot of the police officers in Chapel Hill. I think it's that relationship. I have police officers that come to the gym that I go to. And we talk about immigration issues. And... I don't feel racism from them. I feel concern."<sup>116</sup>

---

<sup>116</sup> Isabel Guzman, interview with Victoria Bouloubasis, Durham, NC, Nov. 13, 2015

In 2006, thousands of Hispanics gathered in Siler City, North Carolina to commemorate the National Day Without Immigrants. Bill Smith offered to close the restaurant so his staff could attend, but they declined. Cindy McMahan did the same at nearby Elmo's Diner. Unofficial reports also claim that Top of the Hill closed in solidarity. Aside from the news coverage of the Siler City events, including a march, there was little coverage of corresponding activity in Chapel Hill's restaurant scene. Still, Miguel and other restaurant workers spoke of the day's events frequently. They were impressed that a few restaurants closed. They considered the fact that the entire town's restaurants would have closed had every employer demonstrated solidarity with the movement.

Perhaps a more hopeful time is beginning in the Nuevo South for immigrants. In 2010, the U.S. Senate's draft for comprehensive immigration reform gained public and political support. However, it stalled in Congress and, more than five years later, it remains an unfettered proposal. The politics are skewed and slow, but immigrants are here, and *there*—both places are home. The immigration debate played out daily in the presidential race is reduced to racist, bigoted epithets and talk of “building a wall” on the Southern border, which Trump demands Mexicans finance. As an example of the gallows Mexican humor Bill Smith described, Mexicans from either side of the border have nicknamed Trump “El Trompas”—a reference to a trumpet, but also the trompo of al pastor, a bright orange hunk of pork that rotates on a spit as street food. The marinade's color resembles the color of his hair. They enjoy destroying Trump piñatas each holiday. At the same time, immigrant cooks are feeling increased pressure, turning the volume dial up on the kitchen radio and listening intently to political news in both English and Spanish as they prep ingredients for their high-end white customers. Chef Bill Smith

notices his cooks are more preoccupied than usual. “Chapel Hill always felt like a welcoming town for them,” he says. “But now, you know, they’re [likened to] terrorists.”

## CONCLUSION

*“If what we see as Southern depends on where we stand, then what we eat as Southern depends on who stirs the pot. We must strive to understand, acknowledge and respect all contributions and culinary cornerstones of what came collectively to be known as Southern cuisine – past and future – more fully and accurately. We must.”*  
- Sheri Castle<sup>117</sup>

By ignoring critical themes and voices in immigration, food scholarship and documentary perpetuates an already divisive discourse. Because food is such a hot topic in popular culture today, scholars and writers have the opportunity to enrich a broad public audience, much more so than most academic disciplines. Beyond that, chefs have the opportunity to use their public platforms and band together to fight for reform. In that vein, the intersectionality of immigrant issues with labor and sexuality issues and the prison/immigration detention industrial complex, especially in the South, must be valued and at the forefront of these narratives as we work toward solutions within our political and legal systems.<sup>118</sup> When an immigrant worker is given agency, we can talk about their work in Southern food with the respect and consideration it deserves, understanding its value as an expressive language, as art, as cultural capital and intellectual property. We must begin and end with immigrant voices to tell this story and use our research to

---

<sup>117</sup> Sheri Castle, “Seven Essential Southern Dishes,” *Bitter Southerner*, Nov. 24, 2015

<sup>118</sup> By the time of this publication (April 2015) North Carolina proposed two bills that give proof of the intersectionality of these issues: HB2, voiding cities' anti-discrimination rules directly affecting the LGBT and working-class communities, and HB 318, which would permanently bar North Carolina's ability to suspend SNAP's three month time limit for childless adults who are working fewer than 20 hours per week. Under both of these legislations, the majority of North Carolina's immigrants are affected. For more information, visit [www.ncjustice.org](http://www.ncjustice.org).

augment that truth. Our society and culture must be represented as complex and disagreeable in a way that shares the truth, rather than veiling it.



## REFERENCES

- "I Might Get Somewhere": Oral Histories of Immigration and Migration, San Francisco: 826 Valencia, 2005.
- Adler, Tamar. "Superstar Chef Enrique Olvera Will Change The Way You Think About Mexican Food" *Vogue*, 30 June 2015. Online.
- Anagnostou, Yiorgos. *Contours of white ethnicity: popular ethnography and the making of usable pasts in Greek America*. Athens [Ohio]: Ohio University Press, 2009.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute Book Company, 1987.
- Bauman, Richard. *Verbal Art As Performance*. Indiana University, 1977.
- Belasco, Warren. *Food: The Key Concepts*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008.
- Bourdain, Anthony. *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. 2000.
- Brown, Whitney. "From cotton mill to co-op: The rise of a local food culture in Carrboro, North Carolina" Master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010.
- Casale, Rocky. "The New Southern Cuisine" *T Magazine: New York Times*, 7 May 2015.
- Castle, Sheri. "Seven Essential Southern Dishes," *Bitter Southerner*, 24 Nov. 2015
- Cooley, Angela Jill. "The Customer is Always White." *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South*. Ed. Edge, John T. Athens: U of Georgia, 2013. 240-272. Print.
- Cravey, Altha J. "Transnationality, Social Spaces, and Parallel Worlds." *Latinos in the New South: Transformations of Place*. Ed. Heather A. Smith. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006. 217-33. Print.
- , and Gabriela Valdivia. "Carolina del Norte: An Introduction" *Southeastern Geographer* 51(2): 213-226. 2011.
- Currence, John. "Chefs With Issues: Immigrants in the kitchens." *Eatocracy, CNN.com*. 20 June 2012. Online.
- Davidson, Sandra. "Farmworkers in North Carolina's Local Food Movement," *Bit & Grain*, Oct. 2015. Online.

- Evans, Amy C. "Muffulettas and Meringue Pies: The Immigrant Experience in the South." *Cornbread Nation 5: The Best of Southern Food Writing*. Ed. Sauceman, Fred William. Athens: U of Georgia, 2010. Print.
- Ferris, Marcie Cohen. *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2014.
- Ferdman, Roberto A. "The crippling problem restaurant-goers haven't noticed but chefs are freaking out about." *The Washington Post* 12 Aug. 2015: Online.
- , Telephone interview. Bouloubasis, Victoria. 5 Oct. 2015
- Fink, Leon. *The Maya of Morganton*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2003.
- Fortier, Anne-Marie Fortier. *Migrant Belongings: Memory, Space, Identity*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000.
- Galeano, Eduardo. *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centures of the Pillage of a Continent*. Trans. Cedric Belfrage. New York & London: Monthly Review Press, 1973.
- Gill, Hannah E. *The Latino Migration Experience in North Carolina: New Roots in the Old North State*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2010.
- , *Going to Carolina del Norte*, Chapel Hill: University Center for International Studies at UNC, 2006.
- , Interview. Bouloubasis, Victoria. Chapel Hill, North Carolina. 23 March 2015
- Guzman, Isabel. Interview. Bouloubasis, Victoria. Durham, North Carolina. 13 Nov. 2015
- , Email interview. Bouloubasis, Victoria. 13 April 2016.
- Hamilton, Gabrielle. *Blood, Bones & Butter*. New York: Random House. 2012.
- Hanchett, Tom. "A Salad Bowl City: The Food Geography of Charlotte, North Carolina." *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South*. Ed. Edge, John T. Athens: U of Georgia, 2013. 166-183. Print.
- Heisley, Michael (1976). *Las Voces de los Campesinos: Francisco García and Pablo and Juanita Saludado sing corridos about the farmworkers and their union*. Los Angeles, California: UCLA Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology.

- Jamison, Leslie. *The Empathy Exams*. Minneapolis; Graywolf Press. 2014.
- Keating, AnaLouise, Ed. *Entre Mundos/Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005. Print.
- Khong, Rachel. "On Being Black in the Kitchen: Edouardo Jordan on the lack of black chefs in fine dining." *Lucky Peach*, 22 Feb. 2016.
- Kochar, R., Suro, R., and Tafoya, S. 2005. *The New Latino South: The Context and Consequences of Rapid Population Growth*. Pew Hispanic Center, Washington, DC.
- Krasner, Deborah. *Good Meat: The Complete Guide to Sourcing and Cooking Sustainable Meat*. New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 2010.
- La Comida de Los Cocineros / Line Cooks at Home*. Dir. Victoria Bouloubasis & Andrea Patiño Contreras. Prod. Feet in 2 Worlds. 2015. Film.
- Leong, Nancy. "Racial Capitalism," *Harvard Law Review*, (126: 8) June 2013.
- Lippard, Cameron D. and Gallagher, Charles. A, Eds. *Being brown in Dixie: Race, ethnicity and Latino immigration in the New South*. Boulder, CO: First Forum Press. 2011. Print.
- Matza, Michael. "Philly restaurateur takes on immigration," *Philly.com*, 4 Nov. 2015. Online.
- McCarthy, Amy. "Will the Restaurant Industry Survive Stricter Immigration Screenings?" *Eater*, 4 March 2016. Online.
- McWilliams, Carey. *North From Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States*. New York: Greenwood Press Publishers. 1968.
- Menkedick, Sarah. "The Migrant's Tale" *Aeon Magazine*, 11 Feb. 2016. Online.
- Mishan, Ligaya. "Opening Oaxaca to the World: La Morada in the South Bronx" *New York Times*, 26 Feb. 2015. Online.
- Murrell, Duncan. "Jump Juan Crow: A Southern Family Struggles to Avoid Deportation." *Harper's Magazine*, 1 Dec. 2013: 57-63. Print.
- Neal, Moreton. "The Soul of Slow Food: North Carolina Chef Andrea Reusing forms a delicious and ambitious partnership with area farmers." *Garden & Gun*, March/April 2008. Online

- Nicholls, David G. "Migrant Labor, Folklore, and Resistance in Hurston's Polk County: Reframing Mules and Men" *African American Review* 33(3): 467-479. Autumn 1999.
- Orr, Niela. "Two College Degrees Later, I Was Still Picking Kale For Rich People: While buying groceries for rich people, I realized upward mobility in America is largely a myth." *Buzzfeed*, 19 March 2016. Online.
- Ortega, Luis. Interview. Bouloubasis, Victoria. Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico. 26 Dec. 2015.
- Ray, Krishnendu. *The Ethnic Restaurateur*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.
- , *The Migrant's Table*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004. Print.
- Reusing, Andrea. *Cooking in the Moment: A Year of Seasonal Recipes*. New York: Clarkson Potter, 2011.
- Reusing, Andrea and Torres, Miguel. Interview by Sarah Camp Arnold. 7 Sept. 2011. Southern Foodways Alliance.
- Ross, Kirk. "It just doesn't get much slower." *Carrboro Citizen*. 24 May 2007. Online.
- Sawin, Patricia. *Listening for a Life*. Logan: Utah State Univeristy Press, 2004. Print.
- Sekules, Kate. "Everybody Loves Vin," *Food & Wine*, Oct. 2004. Online.
- Shutika, Debra Lattanzi. *Beyond the Borderlands: Migration and Belonging in the United States and Mexico*. Berkeley: U of California, 2011.
- Smith, Bill. *Seasoned in the South*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books. 2005.
- , Interview. Bouloubasis, Victoria. Chapel Hill, North Carolina. 1 April 2016.
- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador. 2004.
- Speiser, Gillian. "Chefs Must Be the Public Voice for Farmers, Say Celebrity Cooks: Andrea Reusing and José Andrés sound battle cry at Beard Conference," *About Food*, 10 Nov. 2015. Online.
- Thompson, Charles. *Border Odyssey: Travels Along the U.S./Mexico Divide*. Austin: U of Texas Press, 2015.
- Tipton-Martin, Toni. *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African-American Cookbooks*. Austin: U of Texas Press, 2015.

- Torres, Iveth Guadalupe. Interview. Bouloubasis, Victoria. Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico. 19 July 2015.
- Torres, Miguel. Interview. Bouloubasis, Victoria. Chapel Hill, North Carolina. 7 Sept. 2015
- , Interview. Bouloubasis, Victoria. Carrboro, North Carolina. 10 Sept. 2015.
- , Interview. Bouloubasis, Victoria. Carrboro, North Carolina. 31 Oct. 2015.
- Torres Moreno, Silvia. Interview. Bouloubasis, Victoria. Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico. 20 July 2015.
- & Torres Moreno, Alejandra. Interview. Bouloubasis, Victoria. Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico. 28 December 2015.
- Un Buen Carnicero*. Dir. Victoria Bouloubasis. Prod. Vittles Films & Southern Foodways Alliance. 2014. Film.
- Vida Propia*. Dir. Sarah Garrahan. 2014. Film.
- Wallach, Jennifer Jensen. *How America Eats: A Social History of U.S. Food and Culture*, Summit, PA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.
- Wazana Thompkins, Kyla. *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. New York: NYU Press, 2012.
- Weigl, Andrea. "Taco Quest: 2 Raleigh men hunt for the best tacos," *News & Observer*, 3 Sept. 2015. Online
- , "Second Helpers: meet the chefs who help four well-known chefs shine." *News & Observer*, 27 May 2011. Print.
- Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns*. New York: Random House, 2010.
- Williams-Forsen, Psyche A. *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black women, food, and power*, Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2010.
- Wilson, Julie. (2009) *I Could See Myself In Them: Podía verme en ellos*. Durham: Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF).
- World Bank. *International Migration At All-Time High*. 18 Dec. 2015. Press release.