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# PEACE FROM FOOD: REFUGEE KITCHENS IN U.S. COMMUNITIES

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## Introduction

Missoula, Montana: whatever comes to mind, it probably is not images of global diversity or a site of peacebuilding out of violent circumstances. But when it comes to food, a refugee kitchen is doing just that. United We Eat (UWE), a weekly meal service that features the culinary expertise of refugees settled here with the help of Soft Landings Missoula (the parent non-profit behind UWE), has been serving food from around the world to Missoulians since 2017. In December 2023, we volunteered in the UWE kitchen to get a sense of what a typical week is like for the chefs, staff, and volunteers. We were eager to combine our education and training in peace studies and dietetics, respectively, with participant observation in the UWE kitchen to develop some ideas about peace and food through refugee kitchens.

There is a growing grassroots movement of refugee-cooked food in the United States, loosely grouped under the term “refugee kitchens.” It is difficult to say how many exist because the more you look, the more you find. While they might be more visible in metropolises like New York City, our experience in Missoula is testament to the way refugee kitchens are woven into communities across the country, even in places that people perceive as parochial. What can refugee kitchens tell us about peace? Through our experience at UWE, we believe that they add awareness and respect for the other, while significantly diversifying the nutrition of local U.S. diets.

While there is increasing interest in the politics of food, it is most often theorized as a source of conflict. Through scarcity, maldistribution, climate-driven disasters, pollution, etc., people like to think of food’s relationship to violence (Dowd, 2023; Heslin, 2021). In this article, we consider refugee kitchens like UWE as sources of peace, and we elaborate on the potential for implicit community-based peacebuilding which they engender through food. Peace practitioners

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have demonstrated that peace yields greater food production in the developing world, even naming an International Food Policy Research Institute project “Food from Peace” (Messer et al., 1998). Refugee kitchens are an example of peace from food.

Food has also garnered attention from scholars and activists who study the experiences and rights of displaced peoples. However, much like peace research more broadly, the focus is often abroad (Ghattas et al., 2017; Ghattas et al., 2020; Hughes, Ibrahim et al., 2019; Murphy, 2019; Sahyoun et al., 2019; Tuncer, 2019). From Beirut to Dublin and beyond, these scholars have explored refugee kitchens through frames like solidarity and empathy. They have also found empirical evidence of economic advancement for refugee chefs, especially women. Initiatives like UWE give us reason to believe the same is true in the United States. SLM says they “engage our community in welcoming refugees and immigrants while celebrating the richness in diversity, culture and experience they bring to our city” (unitedweeatmt.org). This is effectively done through food, because “the things that are kept in hearts and heads” as people are forced to uproot are often recipes and culinary traditions. Now we turn to our time in the kitchen where we got to experience UWE in action.

### **The United We Eat Kitchen**

We were greeted at the back door by Casey, the UWE kitchen manager, and her assistant Rozan. UWE has an agreement with a local church to use their basement commercial-grade kitchen. After a quick tour, we were put to work slicing potatoes and onions in preparation for Chef Robi’s Menu (Figure 1). Each week, a different chef prepares nearly two hundred multi-course meals with the aid of Casey, Rozan, and a big group of volunteers. The cuisine always coordinates with the Chef’s home country. Customers log onto the ordering platform once a week to reserve their meals, which routinely sell out in less than five minutes! The cuisine comes from Syria, Afghanistan, Congo, Eritrea, and many other places from which the food would be nearly impossible to find otherwise in a place like Missoula.

Things have been ramping up at UWE. They are operating at maximum capacity with their current resources. Casey and SLM have had several meetings with Feast World Kitchen in Spokane and Project Feast in Seattle to consider ways to meet the growing demand. This kind of networking and mutual aid represents one aspect of refugee kitchen peacebuilding. Casey’s hard work and dedication is essential to UWE. Sourcing the ingredients for Syrian or Afghan food in Montana is no easy task, and that’s just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to her work with the program. Sometimes ingredients are the way UWE impacts the

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community. There is one East Asian grocery store in town that carries some South and West Asian ingredients. Casey arrived there one day, and the owner asked why “all the white people in Missoula want pomegranate molasses?” A Syrian UWE chef had led a cooking class and in the ensuing weeks customers descended upon the store in their efforts to recreate the recipe.

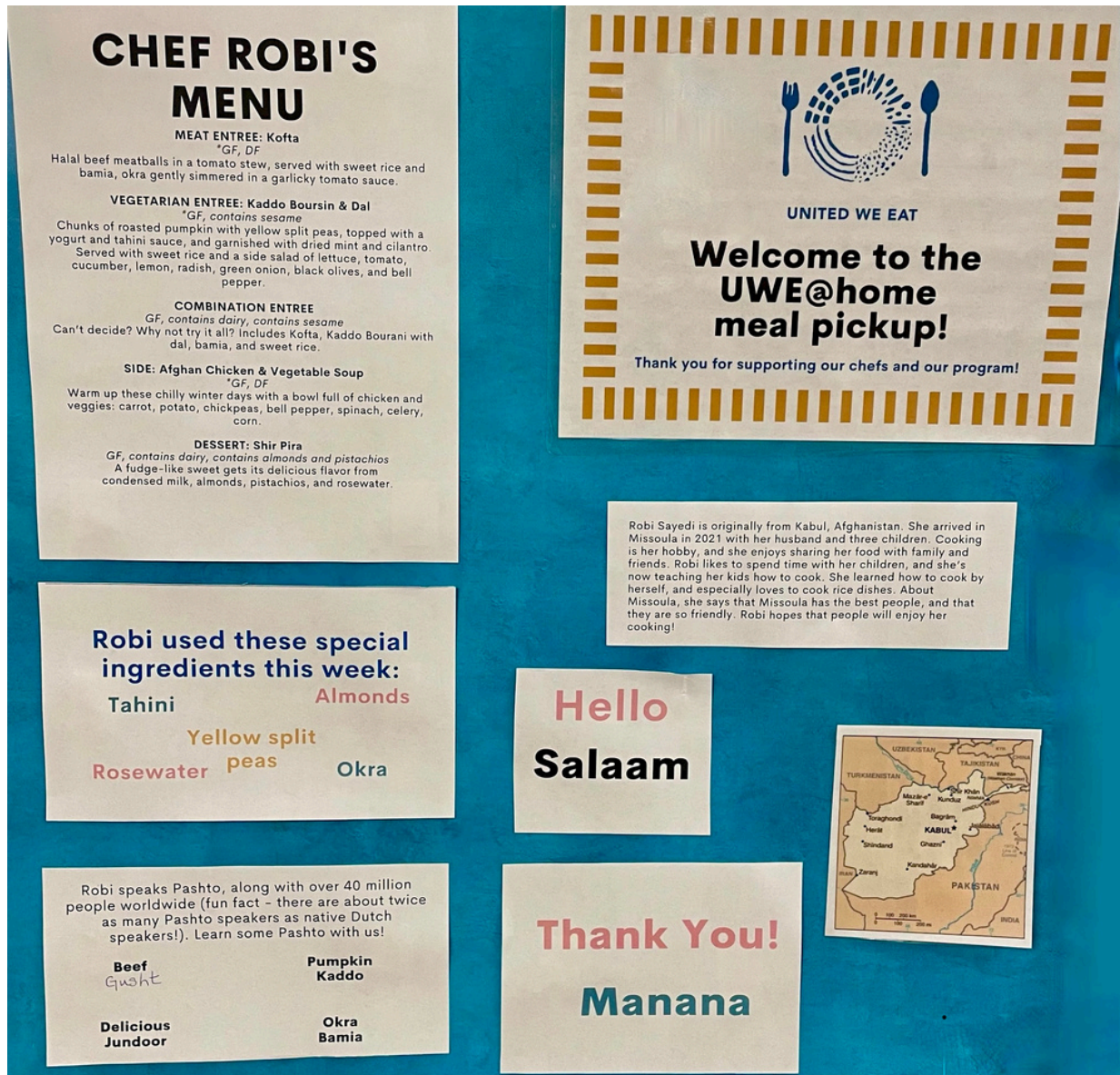


Figure 1: Chef Robi's Menu, displayed on the poster that greets UWE customers when they pick up their food.

As we wrapped up the meal prep for Robi, the volunteer team transitioned to clean up and sanitization. The most seasoned volunteers put away the clean dishes while we helped a few others wipe down surfaces, mop, and load the dishwasher. The kitchen runs like a well-oiled commercial operation but with the ambience of a pleasant community event. Rozan curates a playlist of music from each chef's country every week. Volunteers are Missoula community members, from retirees to college students. They interact with each other, the staff, and the

chef to bring the meals to life. Not only are these human interactions enriching for the community, but the meals prepared by the chefs is also rich in nutrients from the diverse ingredients that make up multicultural foods. Biodiversity in the diet is essential for human health, however U.S. diets are marked by a lack of variety (Johns & Eyzaguirre, 2006). Just like the pomegranate molasses flying off the shelves; learning firsthand about new ingredients, what they taste like, how to cook with them, and where to source them empowers community members to diversify their diets.

On Tuesday evenings, the kitchen opens its doors to the customers. For a few hours, a steady stream of Missoulians file down to the church kitchen to get their UWE meals for the week. Aside from enjoying the food, the best part of UWE is meeting the chefs who sit at the pick-up desk and greet the customers each week. Their families are often there to help in the kitchen or the meal pick-ups as well. Many of them are learning English while working for UWE, having family members allows them to communicate and delegate tasks more effectively. As customers come and go from the space, they catch up with the chefs, their families, SLM staff, and volunteers. They might stop and read some of the info from the Menu posters. Their children might accompany them. The kitchen becomes a space where community is created through everyone's participation, anyone who is interested in peace would be right at home.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, UWE and refugee kitchens like it help the chefs and their families attain some semblance of peace and prosperity. But through this initiative, they are also building peace in their communities with food. From volunteers showing up for meal preparation to the customers buying home cooked multicultural foods and all over again, refugee kitchens provide enriched nutrition with a shift in mindset. Perhaps the more people eat this food, the more they will be willing to question the policies that lead to forced displacement. Look for a refugee kitchen in your area to support an encouraging grassroots movement while enjoying the excellent cuisine. In these spaces, food is the basis for peace and solidarity, which is something to celebrate.

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