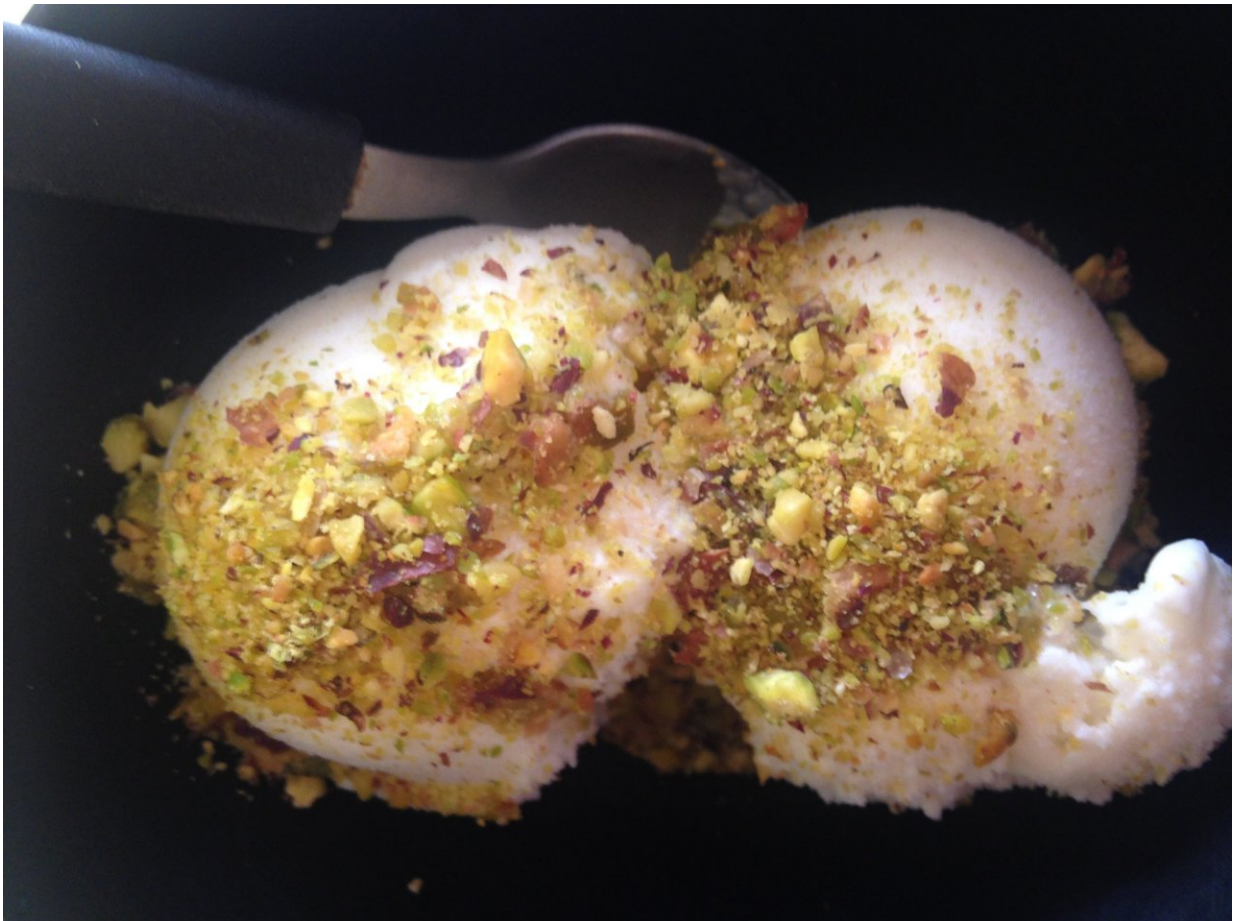


Food transports Syrian refugees' imaginations to a place that no longer exists

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Syrian dish with crushed pistachio topping. Credit: Fernanda Baeza Scagliusi

Cuisine can be considered as a set of practices that permeate many

aspects of life. A dish may recall someone special. The symbolic value of food may also reside in aromas and seasoning, which immediately bring to mind a place or past situation, along with everything that was happening and being experienced at the time.

For Syrian refugees in Brazil, the symbolism of [food](#) has two key dimensions. It reinforces their sense of identity, and it serves as a bridge, a stimulus for the imagination to recreate a place that no longer exists. It recalls Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, and other locales as they were more than seven years ago, before the onset of civil war, in entirely different circumstances.

This is the conclusion of a study conducted at the University of São Paulo's School of Public Health (FSP-USP) and supported by the São Paulo Research Foundation—FAPESP. An article describing the research project, the first to focus on the role of food in the acculturation of Syrian refugees to life in Brazil, has just been published in the scientific journal *Appetite*.

The researchers interviewed 10 Syrians who were rebuilding their lives in Brazil, using food as a starting point from which to address issues ranging from the atrocities of war to the difficulties of being a refugee, and to explore the ways in which food interweaves with culture, migration, identity and gender.

"Weighty issues are brought to light by refugees' experiences, and food is a way of observing these relationships. Food is a bridge for them, a link to a past reality that very probably won't come back. Food also strengthens their sense of identity as Syrians rather than refugees. It gives them bearings so they can continue to see themselves as Syrians," said Fernanda Scagliusi, first author of the article and coordinator of FSP-USP's Food & Culture Research Group.

During the interviews, the refugees expressed positive feelings about life in Syria before the war. "They were very nostalgic, not least because of the atrocities they'd experienced," Scagliusi said. "The upshot was a dualistic counterbalancing of nostalgia with the harsh conditions of their past and present lives."

For the researchers, these feelings were all the more significant in light of the role played by Syrian food in the lives of the interviewees, as the basis for their diet and a source of income for their subsistence in Brazil. Most make a living from Syrian food, which therefore provides an additional motivation for them to conserve recipes, flavors and aromas learned and experienced in the past.

Traditions that demolish barriers

São Paulo received 1,030 refugees from Syria in the period 2000 to 2016, more than from any other country according to data from a survey called the "Refugee Migration Thematic Atlas."

Despite the difficulties experienced by Syrian refugees in Brazil, they have been motivated to engage with the acculturation process thanks to food and cooking. Since 2011, when they began settling in São Paulo City, they have set up restaurants, catering firms and cooking classes, frequently featuring in news media coverage of families whose subsistence derives from the sale of delicacies.

"Most participants in the study had had completely different occupations and ran into many barriers in Brazil, especially after the onset of the political and economic crisis here. The language is perhaps the main barrier, but there are also problems due to the state of the economy and the requirement to obtain recognition of university degrees, which is costly and bureaucratic," Scagliusi said. "They often need papers that were lost in the war or no longer exist. Food is a universal language that

offers many of them a solution to all this."

Only two of the ten participants in the study had worked with food in Syria. One was a proprietor of two restaurants; the other had owned a famous bakery. The professions of the rest had nothing to do with cuisine. For example, one is a well-known orthopedist. The group also includes an English teacher, a corporate executive, a mechanical engineer, a textile entrepreneur, and two homemakers.

Spending on food is a priority for all the families researched, not just for the family members themselves but also for business purposes. "Food tends to be the number one priority among all necessities," Scagliusi said. "They set aside funds for it, mainly owing to its symbolic importance. It underpins their sense of identity and gives them a sense of belonging to a place. Food is also connected to good memories of moments with the family."

For these aspects to stand out, care has to be taken with a number of details. According to the interviewees, cooking the "right" food, with the same smell, appearance and flavor as food made in Syria, requires a great deal of technique and expertise, as well as specific seasonings.

Pistachio and pomegranate are therefore high on their shopping lists. These ingredients are expensive in Brazil, but they were very cheap in Syria before the war. "Even families with more financial difficulties buy pistachio, dates and cardamom. They complain about the price but buy these ingredients for their own home cooking and the delicacies they sell or meals they serve in their establishments," Scagliusi said.

Syrians cooking Syrian food

Ingredients were not the only important part of the interviewees' cuisine. They rarely employed Brazilians in cooking and related activities but

instead had locals serve customers or do other kinds of work. "They insisted the food must be made by Syrians," Scagliusi said. "They were concerned with maintaining the production of typically Syrian delicacies."

They also insisted on how laborious Syrian cooking is. "The participants were unanimous about the amount of hard work involved, including those who worked in the Syrian gastronomy industry before the war," she noted.

This emphasis reflected their efforts to maintain a widely varied offering. Several interviewees expressed pride in having a menu with more than 25 dishes, for example.

"They told us some touching stories about this matter of variety," she recalled. "Syrian food is highly diversified and there's no such thing as a staple part of every meal, like rice and beans for Brazilians. Every meal is different in every way. All sorts of dishes are eaten for lunch. So our interviewees said it was very hard for their children to adapt to the ubiquity of rice and beans. Of course, given the difficult situation they didn't complain about food, but they missed many dishes. One thing practically all of them loved about Brazilian food was pão de queijo" [cheese bread].

As noted, however, sentiment played a key role in the acculturation process. "One couple said they adored rice and beans because of a Brazilian neighbor who helped them a lot when they arrived. She had a new baby and used to cook for them without charging anything. She also gave them the food. They acquired a taste for rice and beans because of their affection for her," Scagliusi said.

The study was part of the research project "Food as refuge—Syrian refugees in São Paulo City, Brazil," which explores the sociocultural

roles of food in the lives of Syrian refugees who work with Syrian food in São Paulo.

More information: Fernanda Baeza Scagliusi et al, Representations of Syrian food by Syrian refugees in the city of São Paulo, Brazil: An ethnographic study, *Appetite* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2018.07.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2018.07.014)

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