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Feta, Blintzes, and Burritos: The Evolution of the Diner and Immigrants' Role in Defining American Food Culture

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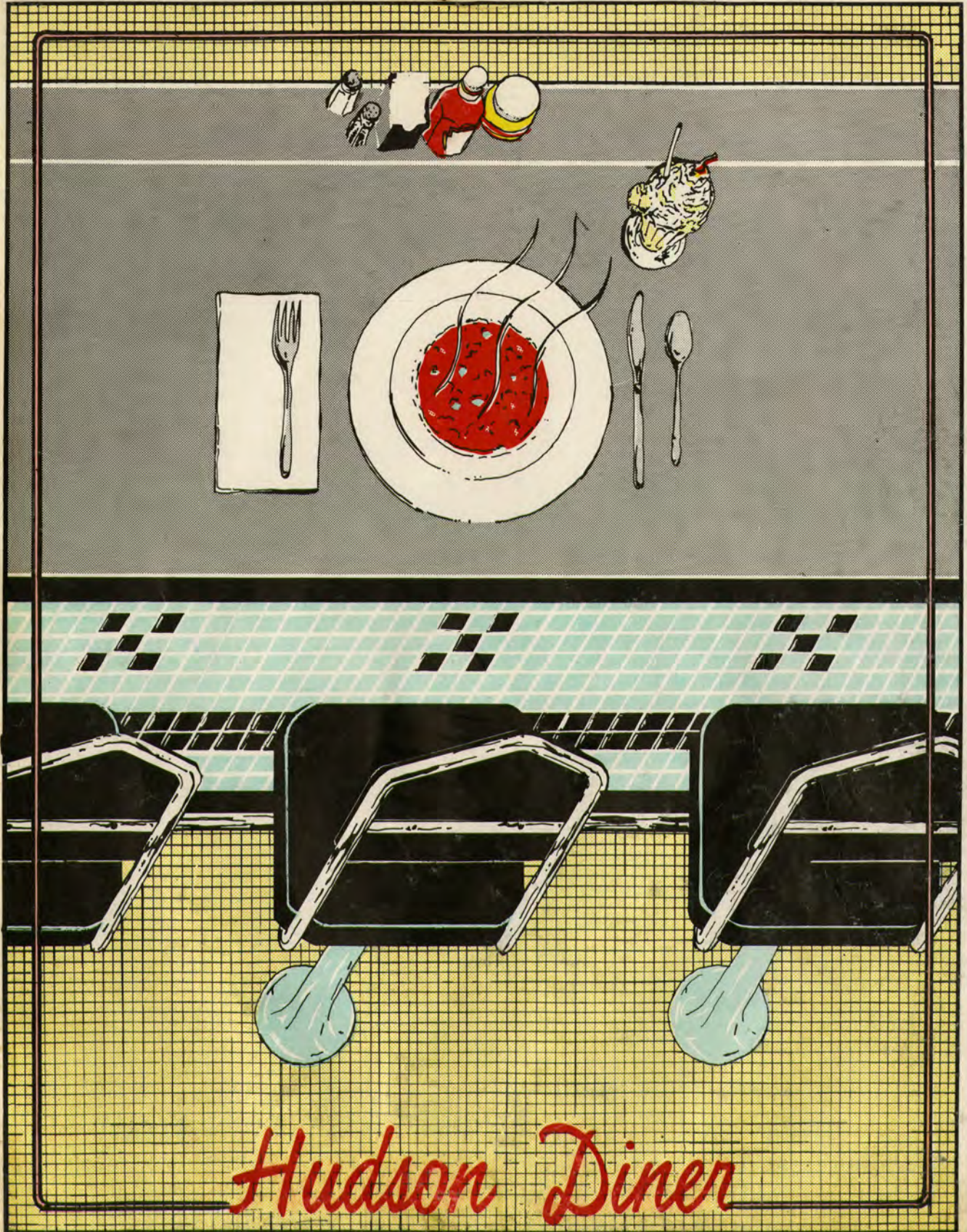
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Feta, Blintzes, and Burritos: The Evolution of the Diner and Immigrants' Role in Defining
American Food Culture

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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This project is dedicated to my family, to whom I owe everything. And to my father, Robert Maresca, who helped me find my passion for immigration and for people.

This project is also dedicated to all of the people who made it possible for me to write it. It is dedicated to the immigrants who have contributed immeasurably to this country, and in particular it is dedicated to all of the immigrant diner owners who I spoke with, and to those who I hope to meet one day.

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Introduction

On a beautiful spring day in Paris during my semester abroad, I was walking to class and came across a restaurant named Happy Days Diner. It caught my attention immediately, as the glowing sign read “HD diner, back to the fifties,” and underneath it were vibrant blue and white booths in between bright pink tables. The exterior alone looked like a scene from an all American fifties movie. I was shocked to see an American diner in Paris, because at that point in my life I had no idea that the diner was iconized globally, so much so that other cultures tried to replicate and profit off them. As someone who grew up in Connecticut, the diner played such a normal part in my everyday life that I had not really thought about its impact, let alone its global influence. I started wondering about the history of the diner. How did it start? Why does it play such a culturally significant role in America? From that point on, I was hooked on the diner. I became so fascinated by its presence in a foreign country that I had to learn more, so I started a search that turned into a yearlong passion project, more commonly known as Senior Project.

There is nothing quite like the American diner. Its appeal is so universal that there are restaurants all over the world trying to replicate the iconic establishment such as Breakfast in America in Paris, France, the 1950s American Diner in Florence, Italy, Tommy Mel’s in Madrid, Spain, and The Lover’s Diner in Quito, Ecuador. The American diner is arguably the most iconic symbol in our culture, and is often attributed as a symbol for who Americans are. While researching my newfound curiosity for the cultural history of diners I discovered something really interesting, something that I believe truly reveals who Americans are. I discovered that the majority of diners in America are owned by immigrants, and in particular, Greek immigrants. I found this to be incredibly fascinating—something that is considered so quintessentially American has not only been sustained by immigrants, but also transformed and improved over

the years by immigrants. Suddenly my questions surrounding the diner began to change. Instead, I started wondering why Greek immigrants had such an influential role in diner culture. What are their stories, and how did they end up in the diner business? This led me to even bigger questions regarding American food culture: how have diners changed because of immigrants? How has American food culture evolved because of immigrants? The success of immigrant owned diners reveals something noteworthy about American foodways, and suggests that at the forefront of creating food culture in America are immigrants.

In my thesis, through the lens of the American diner, I will discuss the influence that immigrants have had, and continue to have, on American food culture. I will also review the history of the diner and consider its future. I will compare immigrant patterns in the United States of America with diner ownership, and reveal a correlation between the two. I will delve into the evolution of the diner menu, and discuss its roots in ethnic cuisine. And perhaps most importantly, I will share stories of the many diner owners that I have had the privilege to meet and get to know. Their stories tell an important narrative about not only the impact they believe they have on their communities, but also the impact that owning a diner has on them and their families. Unsurprisingly, everyone's stories are special and unique, but at the same time, they are connected and share similarities that have helped me understand the larger influence immigrants have had on American food and diner culture.

It is important to note that throughout my paper I integrate academic sources with oral histories. Much of my thesis is grounded in the primary sources of over a dozen interviews I conducted with diner owners and diner scholars. The stories and connections I was able to make with so many diner owners reveals a lot more than reading a book could. At the core of my thesis are the stories that diner owners shared with me, and that I am now sharing with you.

There are two rather important questions to discuss before reading my thesis: What is the definition of a diner? And, what is American food? To start, the diner can be defined in many ways depending on who you ask. Many would say the diner has to be prefabricated and built at a separate location then transported to its place of business, as the first diners were made. For my thesis I define the diner as a casual restaurant that offers a comfortable space for anyone, serving a diverse menu of breakfast, lunch and dinner items at, for the most part, any time of day. My thesis also focuses on Northeastern America because that is what I have the most access to, as I am from Connecticut and go to school in New York State, and because the Northeast has the most densely populated number of diners in the United States. The reason diners are so popular in the Northeast and less so in other parts of the country is because diners were built and manufactured mostly in New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey.

In my thesis I will not delve deeply into the roots and history of American cuisine, as that is a thesis in itself. I will, however, use the diner as a case study to argue that American food is multiethnic food. It is ethnic cuisine from all over the world blended with the American palate. The fact that the iconic and quintessentially all American diner serves so much ethnic food is a signifier that ethnic food *is* American food. At the foundation of American cuisine are immigrants—and I mean this literally and figuratively. Immigrants make up the vast majority of the food and service industry. I can almost guarantee you that the last time you went out to eat your food was cooked by immigrants. I can also almost guarantee you that the food that you ate at that restaurant has its roots in another country. When immigrants come to the United States, one of the ways they can stay best connected to their homeland is through food. While trying to become a part of American society food is also one of the best ways for immigrants to blend their identities into America's.

Diners have offered immigrants an opportunity to grow economically and socially within American society. They have acted as a vehicle for upward mobility and economic stability for people who gave up their lives in the hopes of creating a better one for themselves and their families. The diner has also been a way for immigrants to integrate their identity into American society. Although Greeks are the immigrants most associated with diners, many immigrant groups have made their successes in the industry and continued onto different businesses once they could. Immigrant patterns at large affect the fabric of American culture at all levels, but this influence is present specifically in food culture. Immigrants found a way to integrate into their new home country while also keeping a part of their identities through food. And, as intelligent business people and hard workers, immigrants knew to use the ubiquitous and accessible nature of the American diner to introduce their ethnic cuisine to the American people, thus incorporating it into the American palate.

Diners are American because they have been sustained and built by immigrant groups, much like America itself. Diners offer every type of food and an abundant multiethnic menu because that is what America is made of. Diners are a representation of the integration and assimilation of ethnic cultures that make up what American culture is. I am using the lens of the diner to reveal how American food culture is not only created by immigrants, but also how American society is held up by them. My goal of this thesis is to highlight that the reason food in America is constantly changing is because of immigrants. I am using the American diner to show that food culture in America is constantly evolving for the sole reason that immigrants are continuing to enter this country.

If immigrants stopped coming to this country, there would be no diversity, there would be no ethnic food (and thus no American food), and there would be no change. Immigrants push

forward change in this country because they need to in order to find themselves in a comfortable place in our society. When looking at immigrant patterns and food development in America it clearly shows a direct correlation between the two—as immigrant groups come in large numbers, the longer they live here the more normalized their food becomes, until it finally becomes American. Ethnic cuisine on a diner menu represents its successful integration into the American palate. American food is made up of the story and the people behind it, and in every case the people are immigrants. To me, this realization makes the diner an even better and more accurate symbol of America, and I hope that after reading my thesis you will agree.

My first chapter will dive into the history of immigration and diner culture in America. There is a focus on Greek immigrants and Greek immigration patterns because Greek Americans¹ have predominantly run the diner industry in America for the past sixty years. If you don't believe me, go to your local diner and ask who the owner is. The vast majority of times it will be a Greek American. My first chapter reveals a correlation between the rise of the diner and the food industry with an influx of immigrants entering the country. It will also explain the Greek American story and background as to how they got involved in the diner industry, and why they continued to sustain it for so many years. And perhaps most importantly this chapter will elucidate how Greek Americans revolutionized the diner.

My second chapter is entirely dedicated to the evolution of food and menus at diners. I am sorry to say, but it will definitely make you hungry. But it will give you a great excuse to go support your local diner! This chapter covers a lot, but it is grounded in analyzing diner menus. I was able to spend the day at The Culinary Institute of America's archives and look through a plethora of diner menus from all over the country. There were only a few diners, though, in the

¹Whether to hyphenate Americans of foreign birth or origin is heavily debated. In my thesis I chose not to use a hyphen, as I believe it reflects the tendency of Americans to other immigrants.

Northeast that I was able to track down current day menus for. One of these was The Bedford Diner, in New York. I will compare this Greek-owned diner menu from the seventies to today, which reveals quite a lot about how food culture has changed in the United States. One of the most significant changes is the addition of even more ethnic food. I also discuss the decline of the Greek owned diner over the past few years, and shed light on the newer more modern diners that are popping up in their place. The newer, modern diners are changing the diner menu dramatically and focusing on specialties and locally sourced products over variety and length. These developments in diner menus show how American tastes have evolved over the years, and highlights the influence of ethnic cuisine, as well as the growing relevance of eating sustainably.

My third chapter will place you at five very different diners, and at each I describe what makes them all different, and at the same time what every diner has in common: their ability to create comfort and community for everyone. I spent countless hours sitting at diners and observing, and this chapter focuses on the things that stuck out to me at these diners. I also share more anecdotal stories from diner owners who I interviewed, as well as their relationship to their business. This chapter also reveals one of the most important themes of my thesis: the ethnic succession of diners. Many Greek Americans are leaving the diner industry behind because they do not need it anymore as a way for upward mobility. But their leaving is making room for new immigrant groups to take over.

Once I saw the Happy Days Diner in Paris, my view of the diner has never been the same. What was once just a place for me to get pancakes for dinner became, through my work on this project, a symbol of the American Dream. When I learned of the correlation between immigrants, diners, and American food culture, I realized that America is indeed a nation built on and by immigrants, and this is undeniably reflected in the evolution of the American diner.

Chapter One

Greek Immigration and Diners: A Brief History

The first thing Leo Pertesis said to me as we sat down to discuss his history with diners was, “what happens when two Greeks get together?” He paused for a moment, then continued, “They open a diner.”² I laughed at this, as it was a joy to know that he is well aware of the Greek immigrants’ long standing history with diners. Leo Pertesis, diner owner of forty seven years, was born and raised in Bridgeport, Connecticut. When he was thirteen years old his father moved him and his siblings to Greece for three years so they could experience their ancestral culture. Unsurprisingly, understanding their family culture and roots was very important to his father as he was a first generation Greek immigrant. After returning to The United States Leo attended college for a year, but eventually decided to leave to help financially support his family. He has been working in the diner business since 1966. The reason he first got involved with the industry was, of course, because of his father. His father immigrated to The United States from the Greek island Andros in 1934 to search for a better life. He left his family in Greece, entered the country without documents, and got jobs wherever he could find them. What he found were diners. And working at the majority of diners, were Greeks.

Greek immigrants have been at the forefront of diners all across the Northeast since the 1950s. In 1996, the president of Pan Gregorian, a not-for-profit food cooperative primarily for coffee shops and diners, estimated that around 500 of the 800 diners in New York City were Greek-owned.³ Greek immigrants reshaped the diner as we know it today. With the rise in Greek

² Leo Pertesis, interview by the author, Fairfield, Connecticut January 9, 2020.

³ Edward Lewine, "The Kaffenion Connection: How the Greek Diner Evolved," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), April 14, 1996, accessed November 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/04/14/nyregion/the-kaffenion-connection-how-the-greek-diner-evolved.html>.

ownership, alongside changing consumer culture and the growing fast food industry, diners made a complete transformation beginning in the 1960s. Diners, this work argues, are constantly adapting to incorporate what people want with the American zeitgeist. Diners are not simply an iconic establishment placed in time, they are an ever changing industry that is molded by the dynamic changes of American culture and the ebbing waves of immigration into the United States. Immigrants were, and continue to be, the shapers of what we know as the diner, always accommodating for changing American culture. They have been involved with diners in nearly every possible way; quite literally building them, working at them, frequenting as customers, or for many, eventually becoming owners. Greek immigrants in particular have made their mark on the diner. They have met the needs of Americans, while also using the diner as a way for upward mobility and integration into American culture.

Although Greek immigrants have carried the diner through many of its evolutions, the original diner was invented by an American man by the name of Walter Scott. What is considered the first diner can be traced back to 1872 in Providence, Rhode Island. Scott invented a late-night eatery to ensure that the working class would be able to get dinner after they finished working late-night shifts. Any late-night workers, at least in Providence, Rhode Island, could not get anything to eat after 8:00 pm because all the restaurants were closed for the night. This inspired Scott to quit his job and start the first “lunch car.” It started as a small freight wagon, and was pulled all over town by a horse.⁴ His first wagon was small, and only provided shelter for himself as he prepared the meals. Scott created the tradition that most diners continue today: homemade food. This included homemade breads and pies, which are often seen today as diner staples. And the best part, which became another important diner tradition, was inexpensive

⁴ Richard Gutman, *American Diner Then and Now* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 12

foods; most items on the menu could be bought with just a nickel.⁵ After Walter Scott's retirement in 1917, the late-night lunch car changed quite a lot, and went through multiple different entrepreneurs and manufacturers until it became what we think of today as a diner. Much of the diner's growth can be credited to the competition among diner manufacturers to create the perfect diner. People began redesigning and building what they believed would be the better and more time appropriate version of Walter Scott's lunch car.

These redesigned lunch cars became the "diner" sometime between March 1923 and March 1924, and the name has stuck ever since. It is not known which company was the first to make the switch to the word diner, but the transformation happened quickly. Diner signage and advertisements were quickly changed.⁶ Along with the name change also came a change in aesthetic; diner builders wanted customers to know that their diners were fully functioning restaurants, serving breakfast lunch and dinner 24/7. This made way for the transformation to a more high-class interior and exterior, one that was reminiscent of fine dining on the railway.⁷ This is where most believe the word diner came from; it transformed from lunch wagon to dining car and then finally shortened to diner. It was the first transition in diner history to a more high end aesthetic; and it will not be the last. At this point there were also a number of different diner manufacturing companies, all of which were competing against one another to rule the dining car industry. Diners were becoming incredibly popular in the early 20th century, especially in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, which is where they continue to be densely populated today. By 1925, Tierny, a diner manufacturing company located in New Rochelle, New York, which was owned and managed by a second generation Irish immigrant, was building a diner a day.⁸

⁵ *ibid.* 14

⁶ *ibid.* 58

⁷ *ibid.* 61

⁸ Michael Engle and Mario Monti, *Diners of New York* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), 4

Up until the mid 1920s, immigrants were entering the United States in huge numbers. Between 1901 and 1914 13.2 million immigrants entered the United States.⁹ About 90 percent of these immigrants were Europeans; the areas of Europe from which they came changed over time. Initially it was majority people were of German, Irish, British and Dutch descent, but later it became Eastern European Jews, Slavs, Southern Italians and Greeks.¹⁰ The latter group had a more difficult time permanently settling, as Anglo Protestant Americans were not as welcoming and accepting. In 1911 the United States Immigration Commission brought to popularity derogatory terms that separated immigrants based on their intention for emigrating: “old” and “new” immigration. “Old” immigrants were those who immigrated during the first wave with their families and with the intention of staying. “New” immigrants refers to those who emigrated, usually individual men, with the intention of working in America for a few years to make economic advances that they could not in their home country, then returning home after. The new European immigrants were racialized for their differences such as a lack of “racial kinship with Anglo-Americans”¹¹ which was prompted by their physical appearance, their closer ties to their homeland, and the fact that many of them were single men looking for work rather than families and assimilation.¹² Nonetheless, these immigrants left their home countries to be a part of the American Dream, and so they got right to work upon their arrival.

By the 1940s, the majority of diner builders, owners, and customers were immigrants or second generation Americans.¹³ There was an influx of immigrants entering the United States

⁹ Daniels, Roger. “Immigration to the United States in the Twentieth Century.” Chapter. Dans *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture*. Sous la direction de Christopher Bigsby, 73–95. Cambridge Companions to Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. doi:10.1017/CCOL0521841321.004.

¹⁰ David A. Gerber, *American Immigration: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 40, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bard/reader.action?docID=689293>.

¹¹ *ibid.* 39

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Hurley, *Diners, Bowling*, 34

from 1880 to 1920, and many historians relate this mass migration to the rise in industrialization in the United States during this time.¹⁴ Because immigrants came to the United States to get jobs during this time, they often worked as factory workers, which lent themselves to long hours and little pay, and thus a late night meal for cheap at the diner down the road was the perfect fit. In 1920, these immigrants and their children comprised over half of manufacturing workers,¹⁵ so it was not uncommon for them to frequent diners. An important industry that was also expanding during this time was food manufacturing. From 1859 to 1899 food manufacturing increased fifteenfold making it the leading manufacturing sector in the United States.¹⁶ This is not a coincidence. Donna R. Gabaccia, a historian and professor of international migration, believes the food revolution in the United States was occurring at the same time of mass migration into the country, as the American food market began to shift because of these ethnic entrepreneurs.¹⁷ Because of the rise of industrialization and the food revolution there was a greater demand for the diner. In the Northeastern United States nearly every factory had a diner within walking distance.¹⁸ The “old” and “new” immigrants made up a large number of the working class working at factories, so they frequented diners. Since the diner was a space designed for the late night working class, it was natural for it to cater to immigrants.

Diners became a space for people of all ethnic backgrounds to spend their time beginning in the early to mid 20th century, which in turn facilitated a sort of unity amongst the ethnic and non-ethnic working class citizens. Andrew Hurley emphasizes this in his book *Diners, Bowling*

¹⁴ William A. V Clark, *Immigrants and the American Dream: Remaking the Middle Class* (New York: Guilford Press, 2003), 53

¹⁵ Charles Hirschman and Elizabeth Mogford, "Immigration and the American Industrial Revolution from 1880 to 1920," *Social Science Research* 38, no. 4 (December 2009): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2009.04.001>.

¹⁶ Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA [etc.]: Harvard University Press, 1998), 55

¹⁷ Ibid. 63

¹⁸ Barbara Gimla Shortridge, *The Taste of American Place: A Reader on Regional and Ethnic Foods* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 219

Alleys, and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in the Postwar Consumer Culture:

“Because diners cultivated a constituency composed of a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds, they were sites of cultural amalgamation.”¹⁹ So, seeing the large numbers of immigrant groups frequenting the diners, diner builders and owners worked to infuse ethnic and class traditions. The major way diner owners accommodated for the rise in ethnic mixing was through food: the cooks added ethnic cuisine to the menus in order to please all of the customers. The transformation of food in diner history is the focus of the next chapter, and there I will further investigate the relationship between immigrants and the diner menus over time and how the history of diner culture emphasizes the significant role immigrants played in the shaping of diner cuisine.

Immigrants were not only regular patrons of diners, contributing to their multiculturalism, they were also the innovators of change within diners to accommodate ethnicity and class. The early 20th century signifies an important change in food and American eating habits, and a lot of this can be credited to the influx of immigration. Immigrants started their journey as small businessmen within their ethnic communities, but “the unpredictability inherent in enclave markets repeatedly encouraged small businesses to look farther afield, beyond the boundaries of ethnic communities, for a wider market of more diverse consumers.”²⁰ Immigrants entered the mainstream American businesses, one of which being the diner. This innovation of diner aesthetics and cuisine is a trend in its history, frequently pushed forth by immigrant groups. Greek immigrants, who were at the forefront of progressing the diner industry in the 1960s, immigrated to the United States in huge numbers in the early 20th century, just as the number of diners was rapidly increasing and becoming a staple in American culture.

¹⁹ Hurley, *Diners, Bowling*, 36

²⁰ Gabaccia, *We Are What*, 65

Although immigrants were frequent patrons and workers of diners during the early to 20th century, America was not yet ready to fully integrate these new ethnicities into diner culture. As immigration continued to climb, more and more Americans grew wary of foreign entrance into their country. Meanwhile, Congress put in place a quota system actualized through the Immigration Act of 1924, which with racist intent restricted many foreigners from immigrating to the United States. The Immigration Act of 1924 passed, and was a system based on quotas that favored immigrants from Northern and Western European countries. The new act cut quota percentages from 3 to 2 percent and used data from the 1890 census rather than the most recent 1920 census to base their system on. In all, this act severely limited the annual quota of 550,000 immigrants a year to just 180,000 immigrants a year²¹ Considering America's immigration policy history, it was characteristically discriminatory. 1924 was also the same year that diners had their first major transformation from the lunch wagon to the diner, and a couple years after, seeing that something in the business had to change, diners began to change their spaces to invite women patrons as well. Diners continued to change throughout the years, including in the 1930s the switch to the iconic stainless steel diner, but when the industry started to decline and many diner owners and diner builders went out of business in the mid 20th century, the diners that survived, and in fact, thrived, were Greek diners.

The biggest influx of Greek immigrants into the United States occurred between 1900 and 1924; coinciding perfectly with the rise of the diner. It is estimated that around 400,000 Greek immigrants arrived during this time period.²² The majority of them were young men who ended up in large Northern cities, primarily New York and Chicago. On one hand, Greek

²¹ Daniels, Roger. "Immigration to the United States in the Twentieth Century." Chapter. (Cambridge University Press, 2006.) s 73–95

²²Bethany E. Pierce, "Greek Immigrants," Immigration to the United States, last modified 2020, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://immigrationtounitedstates.org/529-greek-immigrants.html>.

immigrants were discriminated against for various reasons, but on the other because of the relative whiteness of their skin, they were offered opportunities that not all immigrants were lucky enough to have. In these cities it was easy to find jobs in factories, as bootblacks, or busboys or dishwashers. They also found work in confectionaries, selling candy and classic American sweet treats on sidewalk corners next to bustling businesses and movie theaters. By the mid 20th century, Greek immigrants owned the confectionary business in Chicago. Greek American success was so much so in this business that it is said the first ice cream sundae was invented in a Greek-owned ice cream parlor.²³ Also, the creation of the mass Northeastern ice cream franchise, Carvel, can be credited to first generation Greek immigrant, Thomas Andreas Carvelas.²⁴ As business progressed Greeks were able to move their business from sidewalks to store fronts. By 1908, there were about 237 Greek-owned confectionaries in Chicago.²⁵ In a survey conducted in New York City in 1909, it was estimated that Greeks owned 151 bootblack parlors, 113 florist shops, 107 lunchrooms and restaurants and 70 confectionaries.²⁶ Across the United States, however, the restaurant business was the most popular path for Greeks, according to The Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups:

The restaurant business, however, was the favorite route for Greeks. No one knows why so many Greeks became prominent as restaurant owners and cooks, activities for which they brought no special talents from the homeland. Some probably began by preparing Greek food for themselves because they found the American cuisine unappetizing, and then found themselves serving homesick compatriots as well. Since many restaurants were—and still are—family enterprises, they could afford to stay open long hours. The Greeks did not necessarily excel in cooking, but the quality of their food was adequate, their prices low, and the bill of fare imaginative.²⁷

²³ Joel Denker, *The World on a Plate: A Tour through the History of America's Ethnic Cuisines* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2003), 51

²⁴ Yanek Mieczkowski, "Carvel, Thomas Andreas," in *American National Biography* (n.p., 1999), <https://doi.org/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.article.1002019>.

²⁵ Joel Denker, *The World on a Plate: A Tour through the History of America's Ethnic Cuisines* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2003), 54

²⁶ Charles C. Moskos, *Greek Americans, Struggle and Success* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 24

²⁷ Stephan Thernstrom, *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge [etc.]: Harvard University Press, 1981), 433

This description describes just what Greek immigrants were doing for work during this time; cooking adequate food at low prices at diners, and keeping their Greek communities vibrant through what was known to them as Kaffenions.

Typical in any village in Greece were Kaffenions. A Kaffenion is a small space where people, mostly young single men, come together to talk for hours, and drink strong coffee and ouzo (ouzo, a traditional drink to Greece, is an anise-flavored aperitif that is widely consumed in all parts of the country). The first coffee house that opened in the Mediterranean was in Istanbul in 1554, and from then it expanded all throughout the area.²⁸ This sort of space was very comfortable for immigrants from the Mediterranean, so Kaffenions became popular in and around established Greektowns primarily in New York City and Chicago. A traditional Chicago coffee house is well described here:

On the side of social life of the “Delta” are the coffee shops. Each one stands for a district of the “old country,” and men go to the coffee house which bears the name of their district. They sit around the tables and talk about conditions – political, social, economic – of Greece and their respective districts, drinking Turkish coffee or inhaling the heavy smoke of a Turkish pipe. Or they play cards – pinochle or “Thirty-One” – smoking cigarettes and arguing very vociferously at times. To observe this district at its most picturesque moments, walk down the various streets on Saturday or Sunday night. For the most part the arc lights along the curb supply little illumination, so that the neighborhood has a dingy and shadowy appearance. But the apparently endless row of coffee houses are all brightly lighted and may be seen at their gayest on Halsted Street. One also finds seemingly endless numbers of tables inside these places, most of which are occupied by the dark mustached sons of Hellas.²⁹

The interest in owning spaces that resonate similarly to these coffee houses could be one of the reasons why Greek immigrants often rose to gaining ownership over diners. Diners, like Kaffenions, are a hub for sociability – a place where locals gather to eat as much food as they

²⁸ Carol Helstosky, *Food Culture in the Mediterranean* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2009), [xvi].

²⁹ Melvin Holli and Peter D'alroy Jones, *Ethnic Chicago: A Multicultural Portrait* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 522

can and share the community gossip, and Greeks were already quite familiar with these spaces. Dan Georgakas, a retired professor of labor and ethnicity at Queens college, believes that the Kaffenion is what created the modern Greek diner. He believes this transformation stems from the common transition to working at a Kaffenion to opening up one's own restaurant. It was not a crazy proposition for Greeks, as a lot of them came to the United States with experience working for small businesses.³⁰

Nick Miralotis, a Greek immigrant and diner owner, however, believes that the Kaffenion represents traditional Greek culture, while separately the Greek diner represents their integration into and contribution to America. Nick Miralotis has not only owned, but has also been the head and *only* chef at Johnny's Diner in Fairfield, Connecticut for fifteen years. However, he has been in the diner business ever since he emigrated from Greece forty-five years ago. Like Leo Pertitis, he got a job at a diner right away because, as he made sure to emphasize, all diners were Greek when he arrived in the United States during the 1970s. He owns a very small and no fuss diner, where the only kitchen is the stovetop behind the counter. He is a firm believer that Greeks are the ones who made the diner "a big deal." He is also a firm believer of the Greek's special ability to adapt to American life, while also continuing their cultural traditions. He told me that many Greeks got involved with the diner industry because they wanted to adapt to American life. However, he also stressed the importance of protecting one's culture; he told me that "you have to protect your culture. No culture, no humanity."³¹

Kaffenions were, and still are, an important way for Greek Americans to continue traditions from their homeland in the United States, so they remained a space for leisure and

³⁰ Edward Lewine, "The Kaffenion Connection: How the Greek Diner Evolved," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), April 14, 1996, accessed November 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/04/14/nyregion/the-kaffenion-connection-how-the-greek-diner-evolved.html>.

³¹ Nick Miralotis, interview by the author, Fairfield, Connecticut, January 9, 2020.

sociability outside of work. Alongside this continuation of cultural practices, Greeks worked hard to fulfill their version of the American dream; and lucky for them they were clearly accomplished in working their way into owning and managing successful and very beloved by Americans businesses, and their experiences from Greece helped lead them there. Nick's story suggests the importance to many immigrant groups of integrating their identities into the American identity. The diner offered them a way to keep their identity in a way, while blending into the standing culture. Now living in America full time, they were no longer just Greeks, they were Greek Americans. With most Greek Americans, their way into the diner industry was through two ways: connections through friends and family, and easy access to work and making money with little to no English in an industry that was deemed undesirable by Americans.

Richard Gutman, a historian and curator who is often referred to as the “king of diners,” believes that Greeks' progression from busboy to owner is a path for many immigrants in the service industry in America: “The trend that you see is that people start out as a busboy or dishwasher and then in time they work their way up and they own that place or become the owner of their own diner—and that is the American dream.”³² After speaking with many Greek diner owners, it became obvious that hospitality is a huge part of their culture. Many diner owners who I spoke with explained that it makes sense that Greek immigrants so successfully run diners, because they are often extremely economically driven and hospitable. The majority of Greeks came to the United States with ambitions to work hard and make a lot of money for themselves and their families. Charles Moskos, a sociologist whose expertise is on Greek American studies, writes in his book *Greek Americans, Struggle and Success* that upon their first

³² Richard Gutman, interview by the author. Phone conversation with author. November 12, 2019.

arrival, Greeks, “displayed an ability to engage in business and commerce with energy and resourcefulness.”³³ He continues:

The average Greek businessman was an independent, freedom-loving individual who thrived in a society that honored these qualities. His hard life in the mother country and a willingness to get along with little in the United States, where his earnings were considerably greater, enabled him to husband his resources. A natural-born competitor with a determination to succeed, he reconciled himself quite early to hard work; he accepted the cult of success without ever having heard of capitalism and the Protestant ethic.³⁴

However, the Greek experience is a part of the larger immigrant one. The majority of immigrants immigrate to the United States with the intention of working hard in order to gain economic freedom, and integrate into a new way of life. Greeks were among the luckier of the few who were able to be successful, not only because of their hard work but also because their relative whiteness made it easier for them to accrue stability over other immigrant groups during this time period.

Many Greek American scholars suggest that Greek Americans were one of the immigrant groups that were most successful in integrating their lives with American culture. In his book *The World on a Plate: A Tour through the History of America's Ethnic Cuisines*, Joel Denker writes: “You will seldom find Italian stores away from Italian districts. But the Greeks avoid their own districts. Their people are too economical...There is no profit in selling to one’s own people, who know the exact value of the thing they buy.”³⁵ Many Greek immigrants were business people, and like any other American businessman, their priorities lay in making money. So in America instead of selling Greek food they sold, and many continue to sell, American food. They are making money by providing food where it is desired and can be easily consumed,

³³ Charles C. Moskos, *Greek Americans, Struggle and Success* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 258

³⁴ *ibid.* 25

³⁵ Joel Denker, *The World on a Plate: A Tour through the History of America's Ethnic Cuisines* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2003), 45

such as the diner. With low costs and thorough family labor, Greeks hid the value of such products from their American customers, and were able to make fair profits, much more so than within their ethnic enclaves. Although they kept their Greek heritage and traditions close by living in Greek communities, sending their children to Greek schools, and spending hours upon hours in Greek spaces such as the Kaffenion; they understood the steps it took to be successful in America. An example of such is the Greek food offered at Dietz Stadium Diner. When I asked Greek owner Elenie Loizou if it is important for her to have Greek food on the menu, she replied that it is only important because it is important to the customers.³⁶

All of the diner owners I spoke with agreed that owning a diner is an indescribable amount of work, time, and effort. But when immigrants leave their countries in search for a better life in what they believe is the land of opportunity, they are willing to put in all of the time and energy it takes to be successful. For many ethnic groups the restaurant business has always provided employment opportunities, particularly in Northern and Midwestern cities, and can explain why there are major spikes in emigration to the United States.³⁷ This is what happened in the 1960s: Greek immigrants wanted to leave their home country for better opportunities, and because of the changing infrastructure of immigration policies that occurred in 1965, this was made possible.

Mike Paganoas is one of the many Greek immigrants who left his home in search of a better life in the 1960s. At his height he owned seven diners, and today he is trying to work a bit less, so he owns five. One of the diners that he owns is The Palace Diner in Poughkeepsie. Mike is from a small town in Greece called Domvrena, which is about 100 miles west of Athens. He

³⁶ Elenie Loizou, interview by the author, Kingston, NY, January 24, 2020.

³⁷ Barbara Gimla Shortridge, *The Taste of American Place: A Reader on Regional and Ethnic Foods* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 52

came to the United States in 1969 when he was just 17 years old. The late 1960s and early 1970s were a tough time to be a working or middle class citizen in Greece because from 1969 to 1974 Greece was being led under a dictatorship. This period of time in Greek history is often referred to as the Junta. The Junta was a time of oppression and limited freedom for Greek citizens due to the dictatorship. People had their civil liberties restricted, and many lived in fear. The years prior to the Junta, ever since World War II, Greece was already a politically unstable and divided country. So for many Greeks this time in their nation's history is difficult to look back on and remember. It was a time of conflict, desperation, and lack of opportunity. Mike explained to me that there were no opportunities for young people in Greece during that time, and it was a depressing way to live for most, but he would constantly hear marvelous rumors about the United States; one of them was that in the United States you could scoop dollars off of the floor everywhere you go.³⁸ These rumors of a better life in the land of opportunity were a dream for many Greek people during this time, and so the ones that could financially leave the country often chose to do so. Greek immigrants traveled to the United States extremely eager to work hard and make money, because it was nearly impossible to do so back at home. Immigrating to a new country also offered people a chance to live in a more promising and stable society. This time period proved convenient for Greeks who wanted to start a new life for themselves in the United States because of the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

The Immigration and Nationality Act passed by congress in 1965 gave preference to close relatives who were joining their family and to people who had skills that were in demand in the United States during that time. This act was a major change from the past immigration policies enacted in the 1920s. It took nearly forty-five years for the United States to introduce a

³⁸ Mike Paganoas, interview by the author, Poughkeepsie, NY, March 6, 2020.

new immigration policy, as the quota system remained in place until The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. This act came during a time of greater acceptance for immigration, and allowed for more fair opportunities for these immigrant groups to join American society. Greeks represented many of these new Americans, as Greeks were already established in the restaurant industry and had a need for families and friends to come and work for them; most were able to immigrate with family reunification visas. Between 1960 and 1980, over 170,000 Greeks immigrated to the United States³⁹, most of them their war-torn country, like Mike. Because of the political turmoil in Greece, and the inability to flourish economically, a lot of the Greek immigrants were also interested in participating in American culture.

Mike had every intention of coming to The United States and getting an education—his hopes were to become a lawyer someday. But instead, when he arrived he got right to work. He said he was in awe of all of the goods in America, and the thought of owning a Ferrari and other expensive material items drew him into becoming a part of the workforce rather than prioritizing school. He, like many immigrants, was interested in the materialization of the American dream. They wanted to have what Americans had, and they wanted to experience life like they believed many Americans did. He was willing to work hard to make money, and eager to integrate into the American workforce in order to do so. Mike's first job in America was as a busboy at a diner in New York City. He told me that he worked at a diner because that is what everyone at the time was doing, especially Greeks. Mike went from working as a busboy, to just about every other possible position at a diner that you could imagine, to finally gaining ownership when he was 27 years old.

³⁹ Bethany E. Pierce, "Greek Immigrants," Immigration to the United States, last modified 2020, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://immigrationtounitedstates.org/529-greek-immigrants.html>.

As Nick Miraliotis mentioned, another major reason as to why so many Greeks felt comfortable coming to the United States during this time was because they knew Greeks that were already a part of the diner industry, and getting a job through friends and family was the most ideal scenario for newly arriving immigrants; it offered comfortability, access, and the ability to more easily acculturate. So, Mike, along with the around 145,000 other Greek immigrants who came into the United States from 1961 to 1975, went straight to work at diners; and this major increase in Greek American population thus aided in the rise of the Greek diner.

Another factor that enabled Greek Americans to more easily establish themselves and their diners was the rise in pluralism in post-World War II society. Pluralism is defined as a state of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain and develop their traditional culture or special interest within the confines of a common civilization.⁴⁰ Andrew Hurley, a professor of 20th century United States History at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, writes of this phenomenon that occurred in post-war American society throughout the fifties and sixties in his book *Diner, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in the Postwar Consumer Culture*. With the rise of nationalism and pride during the war, the postwar era fostered an easy transition for people of all ethnic backgrounds and diversity to come together. Haley writes: “The war was a unifying experience, and it helped Americans clarify a vision of the world they hoped to inherit in peacetime. The celebration of social diversity in official wartime propaganda and the popular media assured previously marginalized groups, particularly immigrants and their children, that they were as American as anyone else.” He continues, “A pluralistic ideology, thus, invited Americans from diverse

⁴⁰ Merriam-Webster Incorporated, "Definition of Pluralism," Merriam-Webster, last modified 2020, accessed February 18, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pluralism>.

backgrounds to join a society that many had been excluded from in the past.”⁴¹ Most Greek Americans hold their cultural traditions close, which is one of the reasons why they wanted their diners to reflect their heritage and culture. In a post-war society, when a lot of people were more interested in celebrating differences, it was the most ideal time for Greek Americans to shape the since then all-American diner, into a Greek-all-American diner. They were able to combine the desires of the American people of comfort and with family dining spaces, alongside their own wishes to represent and share their culture in the way they see it.

It was not until the 1960s that the architecture and atmosphere of diners began to reveal the ethnicities of the owners. This new decade brought about the formation of the Greek diner—arguably the most drastic and important transformation of the diner throughout its history. This development in architecture and style highlighted the Greek immigrants' influence over diner culture, as well as paying tribute to their success in the States, and their ability to hold onto their business in America's changing times. Their ownership over diners quickly became iconized, and a coffee cup was even designed in their honor. This coffee cup, most popular in the daily lives of New Yorkers, is called the Anthora cup. The design is of an ancient Greek amphora and reads “WE ARE HAPPY TO SERVE YOU” in a Greek styled typeface. At this point in time, approximately 80 percent of all diners were Greek owned, and their failure rate was only 8 to 10 percent, while the national average was at 70 percent for restaurants.⁴² Greek immigrants were introducing something new, exciting, and yet also familiar to diner goers, and it worked quite well. These changes included a much more formal dining space, an incorporation of greekness into the ambiance, a larger diner to house more customers, and an enormous menu.

⁴¹ Andrew Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in the Postwar Consumer Culture* (New York: BasicBooks, 2001), 9

⁴² Barbara Gimla Shortridge, *The Taste of American Place: A Reader on Regional and Ethnic Foods* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 215

A significant change to the diner as Americans knew it in the 1960s was the incorporation of Greek, or Mediterranean, architecture and style. Richard Gutman describes the architecture of a Mediterranean diner:

The typical Mediterranean diner was a palazzo of stone with a row of repetitive arches, surmounted by a Spanish quarry-tile mansard roof. The arches encased windows, with in-fill panels of brick, stucco, or a coarse stone aggregate. The flash took over on the inside, where the design and multitude of materials might be called excessive: wall-to-wall carpeting, smoked mirrors, flocked wallpaper, imported tile back bars, scalloped countertops, Tiffany-styled lamps, crystal chandeliers, Grecian statuary, nail head-studded chairs.⁴³

Instead of smaller, stainless steel dining car models, diner manufacturers began to produce diners made out of mostly brick to appear more like a restaurant than a diner. Thus the sixties became the era for the Mediterranean diner and also the colonial diner. This switch happened for multiple reasons: a growing consumer culture called for eating establishments with a lot more room and comfort for families to dine out. The old diner style was growing tired and old, and with the rise of fast food chains, diners wanted to market themselves as fine dining establishments rather than be associated with fast food; so a more conservative and traditional style set them apart from the oftentimes flashy and colorful fast-food restaurants.⁴⁴

One of the reasons the Greek diner was a success during this time because with the rise in consumer culture and familial values in the sixties and seventies the classic stainless steel diner car began to lose its place in American society. Diners were not originally made for the middle class, and because of their poor reputation among many communities it was difficult for diners to stay profitable. Diners were a place of comfortable informality for working class men, often of diverse ethnic backgrounds, which allowed them a space to banter among one another and eat

⁴³ Richard Gutman, *American Diner Then and Now* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 183

⁴⁴ *ibid.* 179

hearty portions of food. This casual male dominated space did not appeal to the middle class. Often in magazines and radio shows, diners were talked about as dirty places with a reputation for crime and gambling.⁴⁵ More and more families wanted to go out to eat, and women and children did not want to eat in a cramped space that often had no bathrooms or had a poor reputation. In a post-war society what Americans needed was a comfortable and accommodating restaurant to take their families.

In a *New York Sunday News* article from April 1976, “The Middle-Aged Spread of the Diner”, author Nancy McKeon writes of the transformation diners made during this time: “Diners are everywhere and they are quintessential to Americana, although they have changed considerably since the late 19th century, when they were simple lunch wagons hauled by horses. Folks who think diners have disappeared from the roadside scene simply don’t recognize their new coloration.” McKeon continues, “In going from functional to fancy, diners have within the past decade discarded the sleek, chrome look of runaway railway cars in favor of ‘motifs’ that range from early ersatz to instant Alhambra. They have expanded—in size and in menu offerings—and they cater more to family dining than to counter trade.”⁴⁶ McKeon’s language emphasizes the dramatic transformation diners made in the past decade. Alhambra, a famous palace in Granada, Spain, is used to describe the new grandeur and beautification of diners. Like the Alhambra, the new style of diners was eye-catching, and stood out amongst other restaurants that surrounded it. Most diners during this time, as they were trying to distinguish themselves differently from fast food restaurants, changed their signs out front from “diner” to “diner

⁴⁵ Andrew Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in the Postwar Consumer Culture* (New York: BasicBooks, 2001), 37

⁴⁶ Nancy McKeon, "The middle-aged spread of the diner," *New York Sunday News* (New York, NY), April 26, 1976, 30

restaurant.” This signified to the passersby that yes, you could get a quick and simple meal at this diner, but now there would be more to the experience. The word restaurant implied leisure, family, and higher quality meals and service. The new wave of diners, pushed forward by these Greek immigrant owners, had all of these things, along with the comfort and convenience of the old-styled diners.

Newsday's Magazine For Long Island featured an article on Mediterranean diners in May of 1979. The cover of the magazine is a beautiful young woman wearing a long red dress and red lipstick, sitting at a dinner table with a man wearing a black suit and bow tie (and even a rose too!), as they clink their elegant wine glasses together and smile at the camera. You can tell that they are sitting at a Mediterranean diner because behind them is a large mirror, a brick archway and two Grecian statues. One of the statues is placed conveniently right in between the couple, almost in the foreground and at a taller height than the man and woman, so it is the first thing you notice when you look at the magazine cover. The other tip off that they are eating at a diner is the portion sizes of their meal—the woman has a full lobster on her plate, the man has a good sized chicken with greens, and they are sharing a generous bowl of bread and side salad. The title on the cover reads: “Dinner in the Diner: Now It’s Lobster & Danish.” The title of the article, “Anything But A Greasy Spoon” is accompanied by a sub-title: “The old diners, still prized by many for their friendliness and their fast food, are gradually giving way to posh places where anything—from lox to lobsters to dancing—goes.”⁴⁷ This highlights the transformation of diner culture during this time. Greek owners were not afraid to try something new and over the top in order to ensure steady business. People liked these embellished and deluxe diners because

⁴⁷ Marilyn Goldstein, "Anything But A Greasy Spoon," *Long Island Newsday*, May 20, 1979.

it was something new and exciting—while also still getting the perks and comfort of eating at a good and reliable diner.

The Greek diner symbolized the cultural transformations occurring in the United States during its rise. The successes of the diners not only owned and operated by Greek immigrants, but also transformed into a Greek American dining experience by Greeks, reveals the power that immigrants have over American culture. It also reveals the incredible progression Greek Americans were able to make in society, considering when they first immigrated to the United States they were often looked down upon and not welcomed. In this way, Greek Americans were able to use the diner as not only a way for economic stability but also as a way to gain respect and familiarity within American society. Greek Americans took a part of their identity, their greekness, and made it relevant in a diner setting. The fact that a classic diner, something that Americans associate with quintessential Americana and national cuisine, could be turned into a Greek space and be even more successful than it was previously, suggests that immigrants hold an influential role in American society. This begs to ask the question, who creates the cultural representation of food within American society? And the answer, as evidence suggests, are immigrants.

Chapter Two

The Diner Menu and Its Many Lengths

Diners are perhaps best known for their extensive menus. Customers can get just about anything—from an omelet to a cheeseburger, from a bowl of spaghetti and meatballs to a Souvlaki chicken platter, from any flavor of milkshake to three different types of fries. The early diners did not have such sizable menus, but as diners grew in size during the rise of the Greek diner, so did their food options. However, over the past few years many diners have been making the switch to a smaller menu, with a focus on quality over quantity. At the forefront of this transformation of making the diner menu smaller and higher quality are not so much Greek Americans as it is native born Americans, who as of the past decade or so, are buying diners and reinventing them. These changes in menu size and offerings are the most significant transformations to the diner menu since the rise of the Greek diner in the 1960s. What remains the same among all diners, though, is the multiethnic nature of the dishes. Diners have always offered multicultural cuisine and continue to do so, and with immigrant demographics changing over time, so have the menus. From the start, diners transformed their menus to the changing tastes of their customers, so the diner menu is almost constantly in a state of flux.

Because earlier diners in the early to mid 20th century were often owned by immigrants and frequented by the immigrant working class, as mentioned in the previous chapter, earlier diners also often offered certain ethnic dishes on the menu. Andrew Hurley writes in his book, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in the Postwar Consumer Culture*, that

Certainly, diner operators attempted to secure the devotion of their foreign-stock customers by offering a generous selection of Old World dishes. Because many customers at the Club Car Diner in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, were eastern European immigrants who worked across the street at the U.S. Steel National Tube Works, owner

Fred Jamison filled his menu with pierogies, goulash, stuffed cabbage, and haluski, a dish prepared with fried cabbage, onions, and noodles.⁴⁸

This being said, it is important to note that the majority of the diner menus during the early and mid 20th century offered more traditional American cuisine, which often consisted of beef stew, roast turkey, pie, and coffee. This menu composition offers insight into the immigration patterns of the United States during and before the 1940s, as well as an understanding of local immigrant communities, and reveals that the immigrants that most frequented this particular diner were Eastern Europeans. Diner menus are a material representation of the waves of immigration that have occurred in the United States over time. Not only are the diners' ownership, but also the diners' menus, directly influenced by immigrant patterns. Menus did not last forever in diners, as different influxes of immigrants offered the need for new food items, alongside the need to change the menu to meet the changing desires of the local American customers.

The diner menu stayed rather simple and small until the rise of the Greek diner in the sixties, and a big part of this transformation was the offerings of multicultural cuisine. The evolution of the diner menu occurred for three reasons: as a way to compete with the growing fast food industry, as a way to cater to the changing desires of their customers, and as a way for diner owners to compete against one another.⁴⁹ By the 1980s, enormous glorified diners were still being built, and the giant menu had become tradition. Americans expected to walk into a diner and be able to order from a plethora of options. Greek-owned diners were able to provide grand menus because their diners and therefore their kitchens were larger, thus, the endeavor to provide a more diverse menu was successful. The grand diner menu with its culinary diversity

⁴⁸ Hurley, *Diners, Bowling*, 36

⁴⁹ Rachel Wharton, "How Did the Diner Menu Get So Long?," *The New York Times*, October/November 2019, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/22/dining/diner-menu.html>.

suggests that the diner had become a multicultural space, and therefore a symbol of ethnic integration. The diner stood even more as a symbol of Americana with its diverse menu because America is a nation created by and made up of immigrants, and thus American food is made up from ethnic food and influence.

During the seventies, diner and restaurant owners noticed that Americans wanted more options on the menu, and were growing more interested in ethnic food.⁵⁰ So diner owners delivered. This allowed the opportunity for growing culinary diversity in the well-known space of a diner. As more and more consumers wanted more ethnic cuisine, Greeks rose to the challenge to meet the demand. Of course, the word “ethnic” is used loosely in regards to the fare at Greek diners, as the owners knew that Americans wanted ethnic food, but would not enjoy it unless it was Americanized. This is how the Greek salad became what it is today.

The All American Greek Salad

Maria Prodrowou told me the story behind the Greek salad and its entrance into American cuisine. Maria Prodrowou and George Foukittzis are a married couple from Greece who own Pete’s Famous Diner in Rhinebeck, New York. George moved to the United States in 1995 after his Greek friend told him he could give him work at his diner. After George’s business endeavors proved successful, Maria and her daughter immigrated to the United States to reunite with George and start their lives there. Maria told me that their most popular dish on the menu is the Greek salad. George added, “right now we just got two orders for the Greek salad. Greek salad, Greek salad, Greek salad! It is always like that.”⁵¹ Greek salad has become one of

⁵⁰ Harvey A. Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America*, nachdr. ed. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2010), 235

⁵¹ George Foukittzis, interview by the author, Rhinebeck, NY, December 11, 2019.

the most well-known and liked salads in American cuisine. The Greek salad, or often also called Mediterranean salad, at a diner usually consists of mixed greens, big chunks of feta, tomato, cucumber, olives, and onion. There is always an option to add grilled chicken, and it is served with a Mediterranean dressing. It often also comes with a few stuffed grape leaves. It would be nearly impossible to go to a diner and not find a Greek salad on the menu because that is what the customers want. But in Greece, the salad is not like how Americans know it at all.

The earliest Greek diners offered horiatiki on their menu, which is the traditional Greek salad of Greece.⁵² In Greece, the salad, which is usually small and accompanies a meal, consists of big chunks of juicy tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, olives, and feta cheese on the top. But in the United States that salad wouldn't sell because, according to Maria Prodrowou, "Americans don't see anything as a salad unless it has lettuce. In people's minds, salads need lettuce."⁵³ When Greek diner owners noticed their traditional Greek salad wasn't selling, they decided to make changes that they believed Americans would prefer. Now Greek salads come with a lot of lettuce, oftentimes grilled chicken, extra vegetables, a special "Greek"⁵⁴ dressing, and oftentimes even a few grape leaves and pieces of pita on the side. Americans loved these additions, and Greek salads turned into an American staple. The Greek salad then made its transition to non-Greek restaurants and diners, and in 1998 Kraft Foods even introduced Greek vinaigrette to its line of dressings. In 2007, the national chain Panera Bread put Greek salad on its menu, and a

⁵² Priya Krishna, "As American as the Greek Salad," Taste, last modified September 5, 2019, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.tastecooking.com/history-of-american-diner-greek-salad/?fbclid=IwAR3tbYvWyLDaJ8yyIkHBVikExZqhNQnl304OIhopinJ6jvzQmwDkQ0juP0w>.

⁵³ Maria Prodrowou, interview by the author, Rhinebeck, NY, December 11, 2019.

⁵⁴ In Greece, there is generally no dressing on their salads. No "Greek" dressing exists. It was created for marketing purposes. Greeks use extra virgin olive oil and red wine vinegar for their salads.

few years later even offered a second version of the Greek salad that included quinoa and baby kale.⁵⁵

The success of the Greek American salad, and at large the Greek American diner, also represents the ethnic foodways that occur in America. Foodways are the cultural culinary practices of people and regions, focusing on how they prepare and consume food. Immigrants bring different traditions, habits, and tastes with them to the United States. When they immigrate, their identities mix into the many that already exist within America. One of the most fundamental ways in which people celebrate their identities is through food. Donna R. Gabaccia notes in her book, *We are What We Eat*: “Psychologists tell us that food and language are the cultural traits humans learn first, and the ones that they change with the greatest reluctance.”⁵⁶ It’s rewarding to successfully share part of your identity with the communities around you, as well as to feel integrated into those communities, and Greek Americans were able to do this through the Greek diner. In some ways they could hold on to their traditional foodways while contributing new food. Understanding how communities interact with food is an important indicator of what is important to their culture and identity. Particularly in America, ethnic foodways are constantly transforming as immigration and migration continue. Immigrants are constantly bringing their cuisines from their homelands to the United States, and under different circumstances and cultures, these cuisines almost always need to transform to fit the new environment and the new consumer.

As immigrant influxes have changed over time, so have the tastes of the American palate. In his essay “Ethnic Succession and the New American Restaurant Cuisine” author Krishnendu

⁵⁵ Krishna, "As American," Taste .

⁵⁶ Gabaccia, *We Are What*, 6

Ray comments on the clear process of ethnic succession, and how it has influenced American tastes. In particular, he looks at the transformation of ethnic cuisine with regard to fine dining in America. Fine dining had three major waves in the United States, but began, and for years continued with, the style French Haute cuisine. As different immigrant groups dominated the American psyche and space, the gastronomic model for fine dining changed. Ray writes, “American gustatory model for fine-dining restaurants has moved progressively in a geographical arc from Paris, through Marseilles, to northern Italian cities, then to Naples and Sicily, and on to the Mediterranean coast of Spain.”⁵⁷ He notes the trend through food as well: “one can also see the gustemic movement - from butter, sour cream and chives, to olive oil, garlic and herbs.”⁵⁸ Of course, the American diner is not considered fine dining, but it does follow the same pattern of interconnectedness with immigrant influxes and American tastes. As older immigrants grow tired of such labor intensive work they leave their occupations, making room for new immigrant groups to take over. In this process, the food in the business itself changes because the people behind it change. This same trend that Ray points out can be seen in many, if not all, aspects of American cuisine and eating out. That is why the diner menu has shifted the types of ethnic cuisine it has served throughout the years, and also explains why many diners have had Italian food on the menu since well before the sixties. Greek immigrants were not the first immigrant groups to run diners, and they will not be the last.

The ethnic identity of the Greek diner is what propelled it forward. Since the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, and the more progressive attitudes towards immigrants that came along with the Civil Rights movement, a new era was created in the

⁵⁷ Krishnendu Ray, "Ethnic Succession and the New American Restaurant Cuisine," in *The Restaurants Book: Ethnographies of Where We Eat*, ed. David Beriss and David Evan Sutton, english ed. (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2007), 102

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

relationship between immigrant entrepreneurs and the American people. That is why immigrant diner owners were able to use their ethnicity as leverage when competing against the rise of the fast food industry in the sixties. Although many diners failed, most Greek diners did not. As Donna R. Gabaccia notes, “immigrant inventors of crossover foods continue to compete quite successfully with fast food franchises in multi-ethnic cities.”⁵⁹ Their knowledge of unfamiliar foods, or their “cultural capital,” helped them to stand apart from other mainstream businesses.⁶⁰ Alongside the increasing interest in ethnic cuisine, another key to the success of such immigrant businesses, like diners, was their low prices and their use of family labor. Greek diners, as discussed in chapter one, were sustained through family connections, and the diners were often cheaper than many other establishments.

For immigrant diner owners, the multiethnic menu provided a space for sharing a part of their identity and culture in a comfortable setting for their American customers. Americans take comfort in seeing similarities between ethnic food and food they are more familiar with, thus menus were Americanized. Donna R. Gabaccia writes, “Human eating habits originate in a paradoxical, and perhaps universal, tension between a preference for the culinary familiar and the equally human pursuit of pleasure in the forms of culinary novelty, creativity, and variety.”⁶¹ The diner offered a perfect space for culinary exploration while not straying too far from comfort zones. Although for many, ethnic food might have seemed unusual at first, there were ways to connect it to what they were used to, and the diners’ atmosphere and menu helped this relationship. In a chapter of *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity* author Susan Kalcik writes on the symbols and performance of

⁵⁹Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA [etc.]: Harvard University Press, 1998), 207

⁶⁰Ray, “Ethnic Succession,” 112

⁶¹ Gabaccia, *We Are What*, 6

identity in ethnic foodways: “The idea that even the differences in foods are paralleled by a level of similarities is a comfort too, in that it suggests foodways as a channel for communication that is available when others may not be. Americans set aside certain times and places for tasting foods across cultural boundaries in a very safe manner.”⁶² The integration of food culture and practice has made the diner the unique place that it is today and has allowed it to be a beloved multiethnic space. Diners are familiar and comfortable places to most Americans, and the ridiculously long menus with every option have become a major part of that comfort. Americans find comfort in the extensive diner menus because they offer them many options, and little stress when going out to eat with a large group of people and with families, because everyone can happily find something to eat. Americans enjoy the freedom of choice, plus it is reassuring to have so many options, and with such variety.

Save Room For A Big Dessert

Another treat that Greek diners brought to the table were huge and intricately homemade desserts. Lots and lots of desserts. A *New York Times* article published in February 1991 titled “Greek Diners Everywhere, and Where Anything Is Possible” describes the appeal of Greek diners, and sees the dessert display case as a symbol for the elaborate and boundless menu. Author Dena Kleiman begins the article by describing these “Show Off” dessert cases: “It stands like some child’s sweet-tooth fantasy, a merry-go-round loaded with jumbo strawberry shortcakes, giant chocolate layer cakes, lemon meringue pies so tall they defy gravity, gooey banana cream pies, pools of coconut custard and cheesecakes as thick as bowling balls.” She

⁶² Linda K. Brown and Kay Mussell, eds., *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*, 4th ed. (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1997), 60

continues, “Both centerpiece and metaphor, the Show Off is a brash testament to the kind of a restaurant where menus are vast, everything is possible (Italian, Chinese, Jewish, you name it), everything is available and portions are grand.”⁶³ Still to this day, elaborate desserts shown off in glass cases are great identifiers of a Greek diner. If the desserts and baked goods are not displayed in a revolving glass case, they will most likely be housed in a glass case behind the counter, perfectly placed to see right as you are walking through the doorway. Another selling point for these baked goods is that they are nearly always baked on premises, and many Greek diners during the late 20th century had their own bakeries to support the limitless dessert menu. These extravagant cakes, pies, and Greek delights gave Greek diners a competitive edge over fellow diner owners. In order to be the most successful diner in the area their philosophy was, “Well, I’ll do what he’s doing but I will do it bigger and better.”⁶⁴ The same ideology went for the rest of the menu; in order to keep customers happy and beat the competition, diners continued expanding their options and introducing new and exciting cuisine.

Diner Menus Expand, and Watch Their Waistline

Greek diner menus have changed a great deal from their heyday in the seventies to today. This transformation has come not in the form of offering new and different “American” cuisine, but instead, an abundance of ethnic cuisines. Diner owners only put ethnic cuisine on the menu that they think will sell, and for over the last couple of decades that has been primarily Greek and Italian food. But today, there are many ethnic additions. A look at The Bedford Diner menu from the 1970s to today gives an example of such changes. The Bedford Diner, open 24/7, is a Greek-

⁶³ Dena Kleiman, "Greek Diners, Where Anything is Possible," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), February 27, 1991, C1

⁶⁴ Richard Gutman, interview by the author, Phone conversation with author, April 17, 2020.

owned diner, located in Bedford Hills, New York, on a busy commercial street. The international food that expanded the most on their menu are Latin and Mexican dishes. A Latin dish section was added as of the past couple of years, as well as a section dedicated entirely to different types of burritos and quesadillas. Another change to the menu was the addition of healthier and lighter options. This is a trend that can be seen in most any diner that is still competing in the industry today.

In the 1970s the Bedford Diner's menu was four, very full, pages long.⁶⁵ Today, it is over twice the size, 12 pages long, with every original section expanded and many sections added.⁶⁶ One development that stands out is the increased options for healthy cuisine. Under breakfasts foods, the most notable changes regarding health include the egg section, which has switched from plain "Eggs" to "Farm Fresh Eggs." The omelet section offers many more vegetables, as well as an "Ultra-Healthy Omelette" and a "Low-Cholesterol Omelette." There are now two salad sections: "Sensational Salads" and "Gourmet Salads." The older menu only had a "Salad Platters" section, consisting mostly of chicken, tuna, or egg salad served over crisp lettuce. The only other salad option on their older menu was a "Chef's Salad," which included your choice of meat and lettuce. Today the salads are huge, varying in style and ingredients, and have significantly more vegetables. These changes suggest that Americans have become more health conscious over the years, and salads have become main dishes rather than just smaller sides. Funnily enough, the Bedford Diner menu still contains a diet section that was on their older menu called "Diet Delights," which consists mostly of various fruit salads. They replaced their "Fresh Seafood" section with a "Treasure of the Sea" section. The current menu has two sections

⁶⁵ "Bedford Diner" 39-152. Culinary Institute of America.

⁶⁶ *Bedford Diner Menu* (Bedford Hills, NY: Bedford Diner, 2020), accessed May 3, 2020, <https://www.bedforddiner.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Menus.pdf>.

that did not exist in the 1970s: a vegetarian section and a “Snacks” section. Although the menu has lighter options, the “Snacks” section offers a plethora of foods which are mostly fatty and greasy. The section ranges from Shrimp Cocktail and Tortilla Dip, to Nacho Grande Supreme and Buffalo Chicken Wings. Of course, Americans seem to want just as many greasy options as healthy ones.

As for ethnic cuisine, the Bedford Diner’s menu from the late seventies offered only two: a section of Italian dishes and a few Greek specialties: stuffed grape leaves, Greek salad, Gyro on Pita, and a Gyro Dinner Platter. Today the menu lists additional ethnic options, such as different types of quesadillas, Greek Delicacies, Latin Dishes, and Italian Specialties. The Italian Specialties section has remained mostly the same as it was in the 1970s, with the addition of two dishes, “From Sicily” and “From Tuscany.”

The section that stands out the most to me is the “Latin Dishes” section. Latin food is popular in many areas of America, but to be put on a diner menu suggests that it is becoming a recognizable category in popular cuisine. This is tied directly to the immigrant influx in the United States, as over the past twenty or so years the most immigrants entering the country have come from Central and Latin America. This immigrant group was preceded first by Italians, and then by Greeks. The cuisine of both of these groups was represented on the menu from the seventies and persists there today. Similarly, the Eveready Diner in Hyde Park, New York, has an entire section for “Street Tacos.”⁶⁷ The Eveready diner, which is Greek-owned, is large and incredibly retro in style—there is even a roller skating rink in the same parking lot. But even though the atmosphere is meant to bring you back to the fifties, the menu is up to date with current day trends, such as the desire for Mexican cuisine. This increase in ethnic cuisine

⁶⁷ *The Eveready Diner Menu* (Hyde Park, NY: The Eveready Diner, 2020)

highlights the growing integration of multiethnic food in diners. Not only are these new dishes and types of cuisine becoming more popular, they are becoming more normalized in establishments that supposedly serve primarily American cuisine. Combining foods from various cultural traditions into a blended menu or dish is a unique characteristic of American foodways, and reveals just how many ethnicities are needed to create American cuisine.

The transformations in the Bedford Diner's menu are not uncommon, as the majority of Greek-owned diners have made the same changes. Their menus have continued to expand, including new ethnic food, as well as many more healthy options. Many diners are even putting little hearts next to foods that are considered "heart healthy" and recommended to eat for dieters. Elenie Loizou, Greek-owner of Dietz Stadium Diner in Kingston, New York, believes that their big menu is at the core of the diners success. She notes, "We have to have a big menu so that we can cater to everyone. We try to stay on top. We have gluten free options. As the generations go there are always new things that have to come, so we try to stay up with that. We have healthy options. We have to have healthy options now. Honestly, we are very well rounded. We try to have something for everyone. There is a little bit of everything."⁶⁸ She believes that the Greek diner will remain in the future because it gives people everything they want. The extravagant and abundant diner menu has continued to grow over the years, and stays the same for most diners, but more recently there are a handful of diners popping up that have smaller menus that are focused on niche menu options over quantity. While these new styled diners are becoming more popular, the number of Greek diners in the Northeast are growing smaller.

What Happened To The Greek Diner?

⁶⁸ Elenie Loizou, interview by the author, Kingston, NY, January 24, 2020.

Despite the great success of the Greek diner at the end of the 20th century, the Greek owned diner is declining rapidly in the Northeast, and has been for the past fifteen to twenty years. And because Greek Americans own the majority of diners in the Northeast, this means that diner culture in general is shrinking. There are half as many diners in New York City as there were twenty years ago.⁶⁹ Greek Americans are leaving their well-established businesses behind. Why? It is actually quite simple: most Greek Americans don't want to run diners anymore, and neither do their children. Greek diners survived for so long because businesses were passed down to children or close relatives or friends. So without family or friends to continue the business, owners have to sell their diners to someone else. This may lead you to ask, well why don't Greek Americans want to run diners anymore? The answer to this question is also simple: it's too much work, it generates too little profit, and in most cases owners don't need the business in order to support their lives anymore.

Although the Greek diner may be in decline, it shows no sign of disappearing altogether. While many Greek Americans believe running diners is not worth the time and effort, others, who are mostly second-generation Greek Americans, want to keep the tradition of owning diners alive. The owners who are still working vigorously to keep their business relevant in the face of the changing market and declined desire for diners are changing a lot of how the public views and thinks of diners. They are doing this through food. Georgette and Nico Kapetenatas are a brother and sister duo who own Georgie's Diner in West Haven, Connecticut. They are among the few Greek Americans who are determined to make their diner the best it can be; and the key to this goal, they believe, is the quality of the food.

⁶⁹ George Blecher, "More Than Coffee: New York's Vanishing Diner Culture," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), November 23, 2016, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/23/nyregion/diners-new-york-city.html>.

Georgette and Nico's parents immigrated from Greece in 1969 because of the lack of work and the political turmoil occurring in Greece due to the Junta. At this time, Georgette and Nico's uncle was already living in the United States and working at a diner, so upon the family's arrival their father George went straight to work as a dishwasher at his brother-in-law's diner. After a couple of years of working, George and his brother-in-law bought a classic stainless steel diner—Georgie's, then called the Elm Diner. After working for more than fifteen years, they decided to sell the diner, but they held on to the property. After about twenty years, when the tenant decided he did not want to stay, Georgette and Nico surprised themselves with the decision to take over the diner. This happened ten years ago, which is when the siblings changed the diner's name to Georgie's, as a tribute to their father. Georgette and Nico grew up in the diner because their parents were basically working all of the time, and so they felt a strong connection to it. Georgette, very fondly, said that "the people who surrounded me became my extended family."⁷⁰ Although Georgette and Nico are both college graduates, and had plans to do much different things, they felt this need to stay connected to the diner and continue the family legacy. They wanted to revive it, expand it, and make it better.

Once Nico and Georgette decided to continue their family legacy, Nico told me that he and his sister had to take a long look as to why their diner wasn't really that great. They needed to figure out the best way to revive it. Ultimately, they decided it was because their food wasn't very good. Nico continued, "We don't make anything. We buy it all in a box and put it on a plate...and that is basically what fast food does. And so I thought, what we really need to do in order to be better is make everything. We need to pay attention to detail and really learn how to make these products well."⁷¹ So, in 2015 Nico decided to become the head chef of Georgie's. He

⁷⁰ Georgette Kapetenatas, interview by the author, West Haven, CONNECTICUT, January 13, 2020.

⁷¹ Nico Kapetenatas, interview by the author, Phone conversation with author, January 23, 2020.

started making everything from scratch: French fries, onion rings, English muffins, bread, burgers (yes, they grind the meat and make dry-aged burgers completely from scratch!), freshly squeezed juices, and all of their baked goods. In addition to this, they also made the switch to more organic and natural ingredients. They make as much food as they can and the food that they cannot make, they buy sustainably. Nico was proud because 2015 is when, he believes, Georgie's really started to stand apart from other diners. Georgette told me, "we're really elevating our food. But it doesn't have to be fancy...just better."⁷²

Another way that Georgette and Nico are making their food better is through inclusivity. They decided that they wanted to create a menu that would allow everyone, even those with dietary restrictions, to have many options. To them, it is essential that they consider people's dietary restrictions and not exclude certain populations. They wanted their customers to feel reassured that they could eat without concern. With that in mind, they feature an entirely vegan section on their menu (for breakfast and for dinner), indicate possible allergens beside every food item, and signal whether it is gluten free. They even started making their chicken fingers without egg, so that children with egg allergies could still enjoy them. Nico sees the growing dietary restrictions as opportunities to grow and be better.

Nico and Georgette are passionate about their business. They own Georgie's with an abundance of pride and with great satisfaction knowing that they are giving their customers fresh, homemade, and thoughtful dishes without crazy price tags. And perhaps most important of all, they are working to improve their business and their menu constantly. When asked to describe their menu, Nico responded, "Our menu right now is very diner-like. Anything you would find at a diner, you will find on our menu. So, we haven't broken from the traditional

⁷² Kapetenatas, interview by the author.

diner fare. The difference is that things are being done with a lot of attention to detail at every level. We do a few things that maybe you wouldn't expect at a diner, too."⁷³

Unsurprisingly, they always have international foods on their menu.⁷⁴ Right now they have a "Korean Burger with Kimchi," "Chicken Stir Fry," a couple of Italian dishes (including Chicken Parmesan, Ziti, and Beef Ragu), and of course they have Greek cuisine appearing in multiple ways. Under Georgie's Signatures, they have a Gyro Plate and Souvlaki; under sandwiches, they list "Chicken Pita" and a "Yee-Ro Pita;" under entrees, there is Spanakopita (which is made from their mother's recipe); and under salads they offer two Greek options: the "Greek Salad" and the "Mediterranean Salad." Greek food has always been on their menu, even when their parents ran the diner in the seventies. Georgette feels very strongly about offering Greek food on the menu not only because it is delicious, but more importantly because they get to share a piece of who they are with their customers.

Nico commented, "The diner is what we are and what we will always be. But I think as we continue to evolve and grow we are going to reach for more creativity in all of our dishes."⁷⁵ This is how diner culture will survive, and hopefully one day thrive again, in today's society. Greek American restaurant owners tend to stick together and share business philosophies and advice amongst one another. The two main ways they do this (besides regular conversation, as most diner-owners are connected within their local communities), is through the Pan Gregorian Enterprise of New York and the Greek American restaurant owner magazine, *Estiator*. Before he passed, Peter Makrias, the founder and editor of *Estiator* (which means "restaurateur" in English), gave this advice to diner owners: "Change, adapt, limit the menu, offer daily specials,

⁷³ Kapetenatas, interview by the author.

⁷⁴ *Georgie's Diner Menu* (West Haven, CT: Georgie's Diner, 2020).

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

put signs in the windows that say, ‘No Junk Food.’ ‘Fresh Quality Food.’ ‘Family Owned and Operated.’ The future success of diners lies in offering something different to the public.”⁷⁶ It certainly seems like he was right about all of that, as many Northeast diners have taken Makrias’s advice.

Georgette made sure to emphasize, though, that just as important as the thoughtful and high quality food are the relationships that people make in their diner, and the family that is created there. At 11:30 am on a Monday in January, every seat at Georgie’s was full. Georgette pointed to a group of older men sitting at a booth in the corner by the window. Since Nico and Georgette took over the diner, and perhaps for a couple years before that, these men had been regulars. They would come in frequently, and individually, as they didn’t know one another. Then after a few years, they started noticing one another and began eating together. Now, the four men come to the diner every morning for breakfast and eat their meals together. They have become best friends. That, for Georgette, is really what makes the space so special. Relationships and good food are what continue to propel the diner forward—even if some believe it is becoming a dying industry.

The Rise Of The Modern Diner

Georgette and Nico are among the few Greek Americans who are transforming their menu in such capacity. In fact, many native born chefs and entrepreneurs, despite the decline in diners in the Northeast over the past decade, don’t see the industry as dying, and are buying and reconstructing diners all over New York. They see the diner as an opportunity for innovation, creativity, and culinary exploration. Richard Gutman noted that this is the new trend for diners: “people who are savvy restaurant people look at the diner as a starting off point to go in any

⁷⁶ Michael Engle and Mario Monti, *Diners of New York* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), 17

direction.”⁷⁷ Because the diner is such an iconized institution, its exterior offers a promising way to begin a new business. People know and love the diner and have grown comfortable with it, so most Americans see a diner and trust it. These savvy restaurateurs are keeping what people love about the diner and what continues to work, which is the atmosphere, and changing what needs to be different, which is the food. This is how the modern diner was created; and it seems to be very successful. In the Hudson Valley, a few diners in particular have become well known for their modern take on an old classic. These diners include the West Taghkanic in Ancram, the Phoenicia Diner in Phoenicia, and the Oakhurst Diner in Millerton. All of these diners have the nostalgic exteriors and interiors, which wistfully brings customers back to the fifties, and a smaller menu filled with twists on diner classics. They all also make most items by hand, and buy food that is local, organic, and sustainable.

The Phoenicia Diner is a great place to start, as it has a classic diner history. It was built in 1962 by the DeRaffele diner manufacturing company, which is the king of the Mediterranean-diner builders, and was originally installed in Long Island. The diner has large glass windows and an angular tiled overhang, both of which were common characteristics of diners during the sixties. In the early eighties it was moved to the middle of Route 28 in Phoenicia, New York. Chris, a Greek immigrant, worked in the diner in its new location for about a year, before he bought the business in 1983. Chris and his family owned the diner for twenty-eight years, until selling it in 2011 to Michael Cioffi. When he sold the diner to Mike, Chris was in his eighties. Mike told me that the first thing Chris asked him when he went to inquire about buying the diner was, “So, are you Greek?” Under Chris’s ownership the diner was open 24/7 and had an extremely long menu. It was a place for truckers who frequented Route 28, families, and

⁷⁷ Richard Gutman, interview by the author, Phone conversation with author, April 17, 2020.

teenagers who were trying to get away from their parents. It was a classic old-school Greek diner. Since Mike's ownership, the diner has changed a lot.

Mike has very happy memories as a kid going to diners with friends and family. He grew up in Brooklyn, New York, so he was surrounded by a great many diners, and has always felt nostalgic about them. When he found out that the Phoenicia diner was for sale, he was at a time in his life when he was looking for something new, as he had recently sold his business of constructing scenery for Broadway shows and television. He and his family own a house in Margaretville, New York, so they passed the diner every time they went up there. For Mike, buying the Phoenicia Diner seemed like a perfect next step. He had had no experience in the restaurant industry, but knew a thing or two about design, so he focused much of his energy on reinventing and rebranding the diner. He noted, "I knew I couldn't follow what was there, but I also felt that there were a lot of people like myself who would be coming to this area and would enjoy a place to go to that was not only friendly but also upped its game on the food side."⁷⁸

For Mike, reinventing the diner meant keeping its nostalgia, but amping up the quality of the food. The diner in a lot of ways is a sacred place, and it's one that Mike believes shouldn't be changed much. So he kept the exterior of the diner the same, and instead of replacing the interior, he restored it. In terms of branding, he focused on nostalgia, and what the diner represented for communities in the fifties as well as now. The logo of the Phoenicia Diner is an old station wagon with a canoe and paddles atop it, with tall trees and a mountain behind it. It is meant to bring customers back to summers in the Catskills during the fifties. Mike made sure to stay away from "kitch" as best he could, and restored what was originally at the diner while finding additions that fit the period of the diner. The diner still has a classic counter, and booths filling

⁷⁸ Michael Cioffi, interview by the author, Phone conversation with author, April 22, 2020.

up nearly the entire space. Mike explained to me that, “culturally for us, the Phoenicia Diner is really steeped in its history, but also we know that we are living in a world now where the food should be fresh, cooked to order, and as local as we can possibly get it.”⁷⁹

In order to make the quality of the food better, and to be able to buy fresh and locally sourced ingredients, Mike decided to make the menu significantly smaller. He knew that he couldn't have over a dozen different types of hamburgers and sandwiches, and an endless sides and desserts section anymore. The only way the food would reach its full potential would be to downsize. Today, the menu fits onto a place setting, and that is also exactly what it is. When you sit down at your table, the paper placemat menu is right in front of you, filled to the edges with a breakfast, lunch, and sides sections. Also on the menu, instead of advertisements (as diners often have placemats with local ads), the empty space is filled with suggestions of activities to do in the area. The Phoenicia Diner often gets a lot of international customers and tourists, so Mike wanted to act as somewhat of an area guide for tourists. He likes this role, as he knows that in the past people frequented small-town establishments like coffee shops and diners to hear the juiciest gossip and receive the best tips. Breakfast is served all day at the diner, and lunch begins at 11:00 am. The diner doesn't stay open past 8:00 pm, so there is no dinner section. There is often a specials menu, which usually features any local produce that is currently in season. There is a small bar at the back of the diner, where alcohol is served.

The menu stays true to many diner classics but with modern twists.⁸⁰ Today, the breakfast options include “House made Granola,” “Locally Smoked Trout or Lox on a Bagel,” “Egg and Cheese on a Roll,” “Buttermilk or GF Buckwheat Pancakes,” “French Toast,” “Biscuits and

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ *The Phoenicia Diner Menu* (Phoenicia, NY: The Phoenicia Diner, 2020).

Gravy,” “Omelet Your Way,” and “Eggs Benedict.” They also offer more unique breakfast options such as “Cornmeal Waffle,” “Shrooms on a Shingle,” “Breakfast Taco” “Vegetarian Breakfast Burrito,” and “Full Phoenicia Breakfast.” Under breakfast they also have an entire section dedicated to skillets. There are six skillet dishes and they are all very different, and clearly very thoughtful and intricate. Their “Morning in Tunisia Skillet,” which is 12 dollars, is healthy and full of vegetables: “polenta, summer squash, eggplant, bell peppers, tomato, black olives, feta, scallions, poached egg.” For lunch, they offer soups, sandwiches, and platters. They have all of the diner classic sandwiches: “Classic BLT,” “The Mitchell Tuna Melt,” “Classic Turkey Club,” “Reuben,” and a “Grass Fed Burger.” Alongside these more familiar diner options, they offer “Avocado Toast,” “Portobello Caprese Sandwich,” “Crab Cake BLT,” “Buffalo Fried Chicken Sandwich,” and a “Patty Melt.” Having eaten the food, I can say that it is hearty, filling, and with just the right amount of grease. The food tastes very high in quality, but doesn’t stray too far from what is offered at classic diners.

When putting the Phoenicia Diner’s menu into perspective with other diners in the area, it is clear that the menu is unique, and has changed a lot from the classic enormous diner menu. Compared to other Greek owned diners in the area such as Dietz Stadium Diner, the Broadway Lights Diner in Kingston, and the Palace Diner in Poughkeepsie, the Phoenicia Diner is a few dollars more expensive. The most expensive item on their menu is their 14 dollar pan fried trout. There are only two types of burgers on the Phoenicia Diner’s menu, the “Grass Fed Burger,” and the “Patty Melt,” compared to the Palace Diner’s sixteen burger options.⁸¹ There is also a significant amount less ethnic cuisine offered. Alongside the “Breakfast Taco” and “Vegetable

⁸¹ *The Palace Diner Menu*. Poughkeepsie, CT: The Palace Diner, 2020. accessed May 3, 2020. <http://thepalacediner.com/menus/>

Breakfast Burrito”, the only other ethnic like food on the menu is a “Tortilla Soup,” “Sesame Chicken Salad”, and unsurprisingly, “Greek Salad.” Other diners in the area that are Greek-owned offer pages upon pages of ethnic food. The menu seems to change pretty often; even the classics are switched around. This is something that a lot of newer diners are doing, in an attempt to keep the menu in season and constantly new and exciting. The menu is not as boundless or quite as diverse as other more classic diners, but because of everything else this diner brings to the table, it has become somewhat famous and has quite the following. So much so, in fact, that Mike was approached by the publishing company, Clarkson and Potter, and asked if he was interested in publishing a Phoenicia Diner cookbook. The cookbook has 85 recipes in it, ranging from classic comfort cuisine to reimagined diner dishes. It has gained a lot of success since its release in 2019, and is constantly being promoted on the diner’s Instagram page.

Another modern diner in the Hudson Valley that has gained popularity is the Oakhurst Diner. This past year the *New York Times* published an article about the Oakhurst Diner, titled, “Two Eggs With a Side of Avocado Toast and Instagram Fodder.” The article compares the diner to the rest of the small town of Millerton, calling it a “living time capsule.”⁸² It also suggests that this diner is a hot spot for trend-seeking customers, as the food is very Instagramable. This diner, alongside its fellow new modern diners, offers customers a chance for comfort and nostalgia in an old timey and classic diner, but with a fancier menu. The Oakhurst Diner does seem to have a trendier vibe than the Phoenicia Diner, and is similar to the West Taghkanic Diner, which I describe later in this chapter. Part of the Oakhurst Diner’s charm is that it is in the middle of a very aesthetic and quaint upstate New York town, but more

⁸² Steven Kurutz, “Two Eggs With a Side of Avocado Toast and Instagram Fodder,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), August 24, 2019, accessed April 10, 2020.

importantly, the diner itself is an old box car diner from the 1940s. The inside is small and lined with big booths, the walls are painted light blue and red, and a counter extends almost the whole length of the diner. The diner hits you with comfort and nostalgia from both the exterior and interior.

The menu, on the other hand, is very time appropriate and lends itself to the current desires of most customers. It seems that The Oakhurst Diner sees one of these desires as options for ethnic cuisine.⁸³ The ethnic food on their menu includes: “Spicy Asian Cucumber Salad,” “Edamame Dumplings,” “Hand-rolled Vegetable Spring Rolls,” “Wonton Soup,” “Ma’s Pho,” “Banh Mi Roast Pork Sandwich,” and “Three Cheese Ravioli.” The focus of their ethnic offerings is on Asian-styled cuisine. This is really interesting, as most diners, even those with thirty-page-long menus, do not tend to offer many Asian dishes. Perhaps this comes from the fact that over the years, Asian immigration to the United States has grown at a fast rate, and thus so have their foodways in American society.

The West Taghkanic Diner is perhaps the most exciting of the three modern diners because the menu is the most limited and the most experimental. The diner is owned by Kristopher Schram, who is also the head chef. He graduated from the prestigious Culinary Institute of America, worked at several Michelin starred restaurants, and became the chef de cuisine of the James Beard Award winning Terra Restaurant. With such an impressive past in the culinary world, it is no surprise that the menu at his diner is quite untraditional. Kristopher has taken the diner and its form and completely transformed it to appeal to the desires of the Hudson Valley community. For starters, the menu, for a diner, is fairly small and limited.⁸⁴ The entire

⁸³ *The Oakhurst Diner Menu* (Millerton, NY: The Oakhurst Diner, 2020).

⁸⁴ *The West Taghkanic Diner Menu* (Ancram, NY: The West Taghkanic Diner, 2020).

food menu is only two pages long, with a third page dedicated to drinks. The breakfast section includes sweet and savory subsections, and a section for sides. The lunch section has a column for starters, sandwiches, sides, and hot dishes. The menu offers more high end options, that one would not see at most diners. Available as a side, is “1 oz. American Paddlefish Caviar” for 25 dollars. Also available is smoked trout for 4 dollars. Also on the menu is a section for merchandise, called “WTD store.”

The food is artisanal at this diner, and it is obvious not only by first glance but also at first bite, that every ingredient in a dish is extremely thought out and added with intention. An example of this is their eggs benedict, described on their menu as “2 poached eggs, WTD bacon, greens, house made focaccia.” It sounds fairly simple, but is very intricate, and contains ingredients and spices in it that many customers probably don’t even notice. For one thing, which to many is the most important, both eggs are both cooked perfectly. The focaccia that they sit on is still warm and fresh, with a beautiful rosemary taste. The benedict comes with garlicky sautéed greens that are a mix of collard greens and spinach, there is a generous amount of hollandaise sauce, and it is garnished with dill and flat leaf parsley.

The menu is designed for the community. When things cannot be made in house, they are sourced locally. All of their meats are house smoked. They have an in house pastry chef who makes all of their sweets. Kris notes, “I tried to make a menu so that I can support my local farmers, and I can support food that I am proud of and that lives up to my values. But also at the same time not pushing out one group or another, or one age or another. I created this diner for the community and what they were looking for.”⁸⁵ Just as fancy and yet very approachable as their food menu, the drink menu has soft drinks, cocktails, and local wine and cider. The menu

⁸⁵ Kristopher Schram, interview by the author, Phone conversation with author, March 18, 2020.

focuses on supporting the Hudson Valley community and offering creative, upscale diner cuisine. As a nod to the Greek-owned diners and the role the immigrant community has played in reshaping diner culture, there is a Greek Salad on the West Taghkanic Diner's menu.

The Multiethnic All American Diner

Diners have been not only sustained by, but also redefined by immigrants. Immigrant diner owners have enriched the United States by providing ethnic cuisine to Americans in a setting in which they feel comfortable. Greek Americans were able to maintain some of their Greek heritage while transforming the framework of what is considered American food and diner culture. New entrepreneurs are trying to do the same by adding their personal twists onto diner classics, and modernizing what we think of as diner cuisine, which perhaps in time, will become the new classics. Immigrant owners were able to introduce new cuisine into American culture through diners and foster the opportunity for them to become a part of American cuisine and American classics. An example is Greek diner owner Dimitri Alatakis who immigrated to the United States in the late 1960s with his family when he was seven. When I asked him which dish on his menu was most special to him he replied, "Cheese blintzes. My Jewish American business partners' mom gave the recipe to us and it means a lot to me."⁸⁶ He noted that at a Greek-owned American diner you have a "Greek guy producing a classic Jewish Hungarian dish."⁸⁷ Cheese blintzes can actually be found on many diner menus, as many Jewish Americans owned diners before Greek Americans.

The Americanization of ethnic food brings up questions of Americanness and integration. It brings to mind questions of assimilation and acculturation, and the popularized idea of

⁸⁶ Dimitri Alatakis, interview by the author, Fairfield, CT, January 12, 2020.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

America as a salad bowl or, more commonly known, a melting pot. This Americanization of food creates somewhat of a tension between these two symbols often used to describe America's culture. Is America a nation where immigrants must lose their home culture and identities in order to be successful? Or do immigrants retain their home culture and identities in their new country? And does the immigrant's role in transforming diner culture imply that America makes room for ethnic differences, or discourages it? Although immigrants introduce new cuisine to Americans, they nearly always "Americanize" the food before sharing it. It is the only way they believe that their businesses will be profitable. Of course it is important to note that naturally foodways will change with migration, as immigrants do not have the same access to ingredients and perhaps ways of preparation and cooking as they once did, but are certain foodways oftentimes shifted too much in order to accommodate for American customs? And if yes, is that necessarily a bad thing?

These are questions that are difficult to answer, but the Greek and immigrant run diner offers a unique perspective. Perhaps, these new foodways are authentic in themselves. And the American diner doesn't discourage ethnicity, but instead re-creates it in a functional way to American culture. Immigrants use the diner menu as a way to influence American food culture and integrate their identity with the American identity. Diner owners are focused on the success of their business and the satisfaction of their customers. That is why Greek diner owners do not only have Greek cuisine on the menu, but also Italian, German, Jewish, Mexican, Chinese, and beyond. Many first-generation diner owners reminded me that although they are Greek, they are running an *American* diner, and that is what ultimately determines their decisions.

Through food and in particular the all American diner menu, immigrants are able to merge their identity into American culture, and like the Greek Salad, have it become an

American staple. The Greek salad actually acts as an informative symbol for immigrant identity. Tony Pertesis, a young Greek diner owner, sums it up perfectly: “You can get everything at a diner, they are a smorgasbord of everything. It’s all cultures assimilated into American culture because America is not in a culture on its own without every influence of every culture. So, the diner is an embodiment of all cultures.”⁸⁸ The diner is so quintessentially American, not only because of its comfort food and nostalgia, but also because it is a representation of various cultures and identities.

⁸⁸ Tony Pertesis, interview by the author, Fairfield, CT, January 9, 2020.

Chapter Three

A Look Inside Diners

One of the main reasons why so many Americans continue to frequent diners today is because it is a space in which anyone can feel comfortable. Along with the menu, the atmosphere of a diner is perhaps just as important. Although every single diner is unique in its own way, they all offer a sense of hominess and comfort that one just can't quite get anywhere else. You can come to a diner alone, in a huge prom dress with a group of friends, with a screaming and crying baby, or with a family of seven, and you will always feel welcome. Paul Mihas, a second generation Greek American who grew up spending most of his time at their family owned diner in Wyoming, shared with me why he believes the diner is so beloved and long lasting in American society: "Diners in a way are a bridge between two worlds. They are a place where anyone can go and fit in... It was a gathering spot for any kind of person, regardless of where you fell on the social spectrum."⁸⁹ The diner, in many ways, acts as a great equalizer. In this chapter I will tell the stories of five very different diners in New York State and Connecticut that I visited: the Dietz Stadium Diner, Johnny's Diner, the West Taghkanic Diner, Southport Diner, and the Acropolis Diner. I observed that even with so many different styles of diners, owned by so many different people, they all somehow share one same characteristic: they are hubs for community and communal space.

Dietz Stadium Diner

⁸⁹Paul Mihas, interview by the author, Phone conversation with author, April 12, 2020.

Dietz Stadium Diner in Kingston, New York, is a quintessential Greek diner. The architecture is Mediterranean style. It has a stone facade with big windows and a tiled mansard roof. It sits on a busy road right at the edge of downtown Kingston on Washington Avenue, and has its own parking lot. It's hard to miss, as it has a big sign facing the main road which reads, "Dietz Stadium Diner and Restaurant." It has been owned by the same Greek family for three generations, since 1978. The current owners are Elenie Loizou and her husband Xenak, who is a first-generation immigrant from Cyprus. Elenie wanted to take over the diner from her father because she did not want to part from the family business and because she strongly believes that it is an important part of the Kingston community. When I walked into the diner for the first time looking for Elenie, two customers, both older women, told me that without a doubt that this was the best diner in Kingston, with the best food and the nicest people. They come to the diner together frequently and know all the staff and their fellow regulars well.

When you enter the diner the first thing you see is a big host stand situated underneath a grand brick archway. You will also see, standing behind the table, a very warm and welcoming staff member. Next to the host stand is a tall green plant and a specials board. The specials of the day are written with a bright purple marker on a nicely framed white board. On the host table is a cash register, phone, a dish of peppermints, a bowl of toothpicks, and a candy bowl that is shaped like a classic diner, filled with Dum Dum lollipops. Inside the host table are various types of gums and candy bars that customers can purchase while paying the bill. The diner immediately feels comfortable and homey the moment you enter because of these small details and recognizable characteristics such as lollipops and candy bars, placed right upon entering. There are big booths underneath Mediterranean-style archways and next to the windows, with colorful light fixtures above them. There are small booths, too, designed to seat only one or two,

and some tables in the back. There is also, characteristically, a long counter, with swinging kitchen doors directly behind it. Because of the muted colors and all of the brick the diner feels very cozy and old timey. It is not an intimidating space to walk into, and it feels very comfortable to eat a meal there because it is not fancy or overdone.

The diner seems to be busy at all times of day, mornings and early afternoons are its busiest times. The majority of the customers are older locals in their sixties and above. Knowing this, Elenie added a “Seniors Special” section on the menu. The diner is also filled with many regulars who come by themselves. These customers usually sit at the counter and mingle with the staff and fellow regulars. Parallel to the counter, the row of single and double seated booths allow customers who are eating alone to feel less awkward. I noticed that many of the customers who were sitting at the counter spoke with everyone and stayed for quite a while. At the counter was a staff member sitting and going through bills, while chatting with the customers. The staff and customers all seem to know each other really well and are comfortable with one another. Elenie is rarely still. While sitting at the diner I noted that she was constantly moving around the whole space, either talking with staff or mingling with customers.

Elenie has created a true community at her diner. People feel comfortable and cared for. During our interview she stopped and said hello to every customer she knew, which was the majority of them. She greeted a regular as he came in, whose walking was a little off, so Elenie asked if he was okay. He replied that he had just gotten hip surgery, and Elenie’s response was, “Oh wow are you okay? Is everything good?” The employees treat their occasional visitors with the same kindness and thoughtfulness as they do the regulars. Elenie told me, “We just really want people to feel like family here, which is actually our diners logo...and people truly do.”⁹⁰

⁹⁰Elenie Loizou, interview by the author, Kingston, NY, January 24, 2020.

The diner as a family space is not an uncommon trend; in fact, all Greek diners pride themselves on their family owned business and more often than not welcome their customers to feel like family too. They either show this extension of welcome through their interactions with customers, their websites' "About Us" page, and often right on the first page of their menus.

The diner is also an important space for community amongst its employees. Elenie noted the important relationship between the owners and their staff: "One of the things I can truly say is that one of our successes is that we are a part of everybody, we are not above them. We work with them, and alongside them. So, they never feel that we are any better than they are, and that is really key."⁹¹ Most of Elenie's kitchen staff are immigrants from Mexico and Central America, and she also often helps them through any challenges that may come up. Elenie strongly believes that diners represent family just as much as they represent food. She feels that everyone is a family—all the employees, the one-time customers, and the regulars. Elenie is also an active member of the Kingston community; she volunteers for numerous organizations, and serves as a vice president and president for two of them, and is the president of the Greek church in Kingston. In fact, one of her regulars came up to her during our interview and said, "Elenie you're slipping, I haven't seen your picture or name in the paper in a little while!" She responded, "Well I have to give other people a chance to be in the paper too!" She wants her care for the community to show in her diner too. When I asked what her favorite part of owning a diner was, she did not hesitate at all: "My favorite thing is being able to talk and communicate with everyone. And being able to help them...I give to them, and they give back to me by coming in and supporting my restaurant."⁹²

Johnny's Diner

⁹¹ibid.

⁹²ibid.

Some Greek diner owners have held their own for quite a while, and although they may be making less money than they were a few years ago, they are not ready to leave behind their business and don't feel inclined to change it much either. This is the case for Nick Miraliotis, who was introduced in the first chapter. Nick immigrated to the United States during the Junta in Greece in the seventies and has worked in diners since he arrived, about 45 years ago. When he arrived in the United States he said that all diners were Greek, so it was easy to get into the business. He runs a simple operation, with only a handful of employees, in a small relatively dingy space, that hasn't changed much over the years. The diner is very small and plain. There are very few decorations on the walls; the light fixtures are the most ornate objects in the place. As for seating, there are only six booths in the whole diner, and most of them run parallel to a long counter that has around ten seats. It doesn't look like it has been renovated or remodeled since Nick started working there over fifteen years ago. The toilet in the bathroom is out of order, and I can't say for how long that has been the case, but my bet is that it's been a while.

The only kitchen—which comprises a stove top, fryers, and toasters—is located right behind the counter. And as mentioned in the first chapter, the *only* chef is Nick. This is by choice; Nick doesn't want anyone else cooking the food. To ensure customers are getting the best quality all the time he wants to cook all the time. So while sitting and eating or sipping coffee, everyone can see and hear Nick cooking their food, as well as calling to his waitresses to pick up orders. Nick's constant presence really humanizes the diner and allows for an easy relationship between him and his customers. It also makes his business incredibly transparent; everyone can see what he and his staff are doing at all times. There's really no secrecy at this diner. Plus, Nick is really a character. He has a lot of personality and holds his own well. It's fun to sit at the counter and watch him cook, especially because of his unbelievably quick turnover

of orders. Watching him poach eggs while simultaneously making home fries and a hollandaise sauce while one of his waitresses stands next to him and toasts and butters the bread, is sort of addictive. Nick and his staff have gotten everything at this diner down to a science. This all contributes to the diner's unique and compelling charm. The diner doesn't need to be fancy or have a working toilet for it to be good. The only thing the customers want is good, fresh food and a comfortable seat to eat it in. That a chilled-out Greek guy is their chef is an added perk.

Nick has owned Johnny's Diner in Fairfield, Connecticut, for 15 years. It doesn't look like a diner at all from the outside, as it is located in a strip mall, but Nick said that that doesn't matter because it is his food that is what makes his diner a diner. As a diner that has been named among Fairfield County's best by *Connecticut Magazine* multiple times, Nick says that people like it so much because of the food. The food is simple, served fast, and always served hot. Like many diners, it is a place for regulars to sit and have their daily omelet and cup of coffee. The majority of the customers at Nick's diner are regulars, and his biggest wave of the day is the early morning. Most of the regulars, Nick notes, are working people—construction workers, mechanics, some doctors. Nick is very proud to have so many repeat customers, “That's how you survive,” he said. “Having regulars.”⁹³

While sitting at the counter I noticed that almost every single customer that walked into the diner was greeted by their name and a “how are you doing today?” by either Nick himself, or one of the waitresses. Joanna, Nick's daughter and one of the main waitresses at Johnny's diner, told me, “we don't get a lot of new faces, and when we do, we notice. It is important to pay attention to detail. It's a family business so I have to make sure it's presentable and the people are happy.”⁹⁴ Joanna is very good at paying attention to detail; she knew many of the customers'

⁹³ Nick Miraliotis, interview by the author, Fairfield, CONNECTICUT, January 9, 2020.

⁹⁴ Joanna Miraliotis, interview by the author, Fairfield, CT, January 9, 2020.

orders by heart and would just say to them “your usual order?” This level of familiarity and repetition seems to be what makes Nick’s customers so comfortable at his diner, and why they continue to come back every day. The casual and honest nature of the diner is an easy atmosphere to grow comfortable with, especially when you are always remembered.

Joanna is twenty-seven years old and has worked at the diner since she was fifteen. Although she loves spending time with her father, the day I interviewed the two of them was one of her last days at work, as she is leaving to be a full-time student. Joanna is extremely excited to begin the next chapter of her life, and perhaps even more excited to close the book on being a waitress. She emphasized, “I just want to ensure that I never have to do this. Unless I’m a millionaire and I want to for the love of food.”⁹⁵ Although Nick has created a successful and profitable business for himself, he has not taken one day off since he began ownership fifteen years ago. “Not one day off?” I asked his daughter. “No. Not even one day off.” This is not the life that Joanna wants for herself, especially having seen it so close. As I have heard from many, owning a diner is not a business, it is a way of life. And there are no days off from life.

The West Taghkanic Diner

The West Taghkanic Diner sits on a very busy road in Ancram, New York, with little to no businesses near it. It appears out of nowhere, and its shiny stainless steel exterior and huge sign make it is nearly impossible to miss. This, of course, is the intention of roadside diners, and has been the model since their popularity in the 1940s. With its architecture and its placement, the West Taghkanic Diner feels like a blast from the past for diner goers. But this diner is nothing like the original diner, or the Greek diner for that matter. Its looks are the same as an

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

older style diner to appeal to anyone driving by; because diners are reliable and desirable for Americans, most people would not hesitate to stop in for a bite. It also resonates with nostalgia, which is often very comforting to most driving by or walking in.

Once you take your first steps into the diner, it becomes clear that it is different than most. There is a small entranceway before you get into the main building, and it is filled with beautiful potted plants. It is surprising to see, as most diners do not fill their entranceway with plants, but instead with ATM machines, benches to sit on, or sometimes even claw machines. When you enter the main part of the diner, one of the first things to notice is how clean and organized it is. Everything is in its place and seems very intentional. It has the classic set up of a diner: a long counter with stools, drinks and fresh baked goods behind it, and vibrant red booths. But these characteristics are amplified in the space, and have a modern feel to them. The diner has been modernized; the decor is simple but bold, and the energy of the diner is hip but very laid back, a comfortable yet really exciting space. It's no coincidence that the fashion company Zara recently shot a commercial for its children's line at the diner. I think this drives home the nostalgic yet trendy atmosphere that is the West Taghkanic Diner.

While sitting and eating at the West Taghkanic I noticed that many people came in and out. My favorite table was the group of middle-aged adults sitting, who, after eating their breakfast, all ordered Bloody Marys and took out a deck of playing cards. I also noticed a man sitting at a table by the window working on his computer and sipping a cup of coffee. He had been there when I arrived, and remained sitting when I left. I was surprised by this, as diners are usually places for relatively quick turnovers and a lot of chatter. During my conversation with the owner, Kristopher, I asked if he knew who the man was. Kristopher said that the man is a regular and comes into the diner to do work all the time. This is unusual for a normal diner, but

not for the West Taghkanic. This diner is not a place for a quick and mindless breakfast: it is a space for comfort and enjoyment, a space that people find themselves spending hours at.

Kristopher spends a lot of his time talking with customers and being available for them to ask questions. He believes it is important to make connections with your customers, and he simply just wants to. This diner is a passion for him just as much as it is a way to give back to the community. He created this diner based on what he believed would be best for the community, and a nice balance of old and modern was a part of that. Another part of that was offering locals a comfortable space to sit and enjoy for as long as they want. He thinks that casual spaces are “awesome,” and from his diner he wants to provide good high quality food in a casual setting. He told me that he is “really proud of creating a space that people enjoy.”⁹⁶

Southport Diner

The Southport diner, located on the Post Road in Fairfield, Connecticut, is impossible to miss. When I saw it for the first time my jaw dropped and I stopped my car without even thinking, pulled into the parking lot, and ran to the entrance to introduce myself to the owner, who was still working at 9 pm on a Friday night. It is a huge stainless steel diner on the busiest road in town, with bright lights and a large sign reading “Southport Diner.”. It is owned by the Pertesis family, whom I introduced at the beginning of chapter one. They actually just recently bought the property from the previous Greek owners. After being the “go to” diner in the area for years, the previous diner grew old and tired. So, one diner’s failure turned into the potential for a new diner’s success. The idea to buy the diner and transform it was Tony’s. Leo’s son. Leo already owns Andros diner, a popular diner and the only one open 24/7 on the other side of town,

⁹⁶ Kristopher Schram, interview by the author, Phone conversation with author, March 18, 2020.

but when Tony said he wanted to manage his own diner, Leo was thrilled. It means a lot to him that their businesses stay in their family and that Tony wants to work to make the diner better and more relevant to today's customers.

The first thing the Pertesis family did after buying the old diner was demolish it. In its place they built a stunning and massive exaggerated modern stainless steel diner with purple and blue neon lights, bright interior lights, and windows all around the front. . At any time of day, the diner will catch your eye. The shiny stainless steel is enhanced by red and gold tints that run all along the front panels. At night, the diner glows because there are bright lights shining onto the diner as well as out to the street. The purple and blue neon lights run across the entire roofline, and if you look closely enough through the windows you can see a big toy claw machine in the entranceway and a portrait of Paul Newman. Paul Newman, besides being a famous actor and philanthropist, lived most of his life with his family in Westport, just a few miles from the diner, so he was a solid figure in the community. Leo and Tony chose stainless steel as a homage to the older era of diners. Appealing to customers' nostalgia for the past, Tony and Leo believe, is an important factor when trying to run a successful diner. But at the same time they need to appeal to younger generations so that is why Tony wanted the diner to be so big and bold.

The inside of the diner is just as bright as the outside and has a fifties themes: from the giant Elvis Presley photograph hanging over a few booths and the Betty Boop statue beside the host table, to the classic big red booths that line most of the diner. Loud pop music plays in the background, mostly songs that young people listen to on the radio. When you enter the diner right in front of you is a huge glass case filled with home baked desserts. These desserts are reminiscent of the enormous baked goods selection from Greek diners in the seventies. These desserts are grand and decorated. They include banana cream pie, almond cream cake, lemon

meringue, New York style cheesecake, flan and apple pie. Unsurprisingly, there is also a big tray of baklava. Behind the glass dessert case is a long counter that glistens from the neon blue light above it. Tony is clearly passionate about his career, and puts a lot of effort into the atmosphere and vibe of his diner, but is also realistic in his expectations of the future of diners. He is trying to change that future. Although he is trying to create a space that is comfortable for everyone, he wants to make it inviting to younger generations who do not typically frequent diners. That is why he has chosen to infuse older characteristics and relics from diners' early history along with new things. This atmosphere Tony has created works very well. The diner is reminiscent of not only early Greek-owned diners, but also the iconic fifties diner, while at the same time offering perks and characteristics that greatly appeal to younger generations. This includes the boldness of the diner, the loud pop music, adding healthier and trendier options to the menu such as avocado, and hopefully in the near future hosting weekly disco nights for teens.

I asked both Tony and Leo what their favorite part of owning diners was, and they both talked about the customers. Leo said that his favorite thing is the gratification he gets from happy and satisfied customers, and Tony's favorite thing is being able to constantly meet new people and talk to everyone. For them, that is a natural part of owning a diner. It is Tony's goal that his diner acts as a "friendly place where everyone can be comfortable."⁹⁷ Leo Pertesis is still very invested in his work, "I am still enjoying what I am doing," he told me. "When it comes to the point where my heart's not in it or I feel a hindrance to the business I will decide to move on...but so long as I enjoy what I am doing and can do it to the best of my ability I am going to continue to do it. And hopefully pass it down to the next generation; the children."⁹⁸ He has three children: John, Tony, and Maria, all of whom are adults in the restaurant business. John, the

⁹⁷ Tony Pertesis, interview by the author, Fairfield, CT, January 9, 2020.

⁹⁸ Leo Pertesis, interview by the author, Fairfield, CONNECTICUT, January 9, 2020.

oldest of the siblings, manages Andros Diner, and Tony manages the newly built Southport Diner. Maria, the only child who decided to leave the family diner business, opened a tequila bar about twelve years ago.

It seems that Maria may be ahead of the curve in choosing to leave her diner roots behind; her father believes that someday Greek diners are “going to be a thing of the past.” He explains that this is because the younger generation Greeks do not want to be in this line of work, as they would rather be professionals. This is also not the life that Tony Pertesis wants for his children. When talking about the future of diners he very confidently added: “I wouldn’t even give it [Southport Diner] to my family. It’s too difficult. It’s a job for immigrants.”⁹⁹ The diner is a lifestyle that immigrants are often willing to take up in order to gain upward mobility in this country, and for many Greeks, they don’t need it as much anymore. Like Tony and Leo, many of the Greek Americans who are still in the industry today are there because they have grown to really enjoy ownership. Despite the incredible challenges and exhausting work hours, they want to work to make their diners the best and their customers the happiest.

The Acropolis Diner

The Acropolis Diner in Poughkeepsie, New York, has been Greek owned for years. So much so that, as you can imagine by the name, its architecture and interior were designed to feel very Greek and Mediterranean. Big stones cover the entire facade, large windows line all the sides, and the roof is stainless steel and hangs over the edge of the building. Inside, there are Grecian styled columns lined throughout the dining area, a couple of Greek statues, and even a very large painting of the Acropolis ruins in Athens. Behind the counter there is also a large

⁹⁹ Pertesis, interview by the author.

Acropolis-shaped candle. The menu itself also emphasizes its greekness—it is a grand Greek column with a stoic-looking coffee cup sitting at the top. The first thing you see when you walk into the diner is a substantial glass case filled with a variety of freshly baked pastries, a relatively reliable sign that this diner is owned by Greeks because extensive homemade desserts are an important part of Greek diner culture. As I walked inside this diner for the first time, I couldn't believe how Greek it was. Many diner owners in the sixties through the eighties emphasized their greekness, but this is much less common today. As you can imagine, I have been inside a lot of diners as of recently, and I have never seen one that has glorified and displayed its greekness so much.

I walked into the diner and standing at the front counter were three people who appeared to be of Hispanic descent. I asked them if the owner was in and would be willing to speak with me, and one of the guys at the counter raised his hand and said, "Hi, I'm the owner. How can I help you?" To my surprise, the owner was not a loud, white Greek man; he was a soft-spoken Mexican American. He took over ownership of the Acropolis diner just about five months ago, after his longtime boss decided he did not want to be in the diner business anymore. His former boss and owner of the Acropolis diner, is a Greek immigrant who had been a part of the diner and owner for many years. Miguel, the new owner seemed very happy about his new position, but also unsurprisingly very overwhelmed.

The new owner explained to me that he worked his way up to ownership. He is from a small city in Mexico and moved to Poughkeepsie after hearing from his friends that there were a lot of opportunities to work there. He got a job at the Acropolis Diner first as a busboy. A couple of years later he became a cook, then shortly after that a chef, and years later became the manager. With so many years of commitment to the diner, the former owner felt extremely

confident in giving the diners ownership to Miguel. Miguel is actually from the same city in Mexico as the current owners of the Olympic Diner in Kingston, which is no coincidence. Families and friends follow each other to America, and Kingston and its surrounding areas are densely populated with Mexican and Latinx immigrants. The Olympic Diner, as its name would suggest, was owned by a Greek family for many years, and was also just recently sold to one of the Mexican American workers. This is the same story as the vast majority of Greek diner owners as well. It resonates with the American Dream: you come to the country as an immigrant looking for any job, and once you find one you work there for years, climbing your way up until you can one day gain ownership over the business. This finding emphasizes a pattern that can be seen between the diner industry in America and immigration trends over the years.

The relationship between the success of the diner, through its workers, owners, and menu, is directly related to immigrant patterns in the United States. The diner is an industry that offers the chance for relatively simple upward mobility. Dimitri Alatakis, who has made a very comfortable life for himself through owning diners and real estate equates the diner to his successes in life. When I asked what business was more successful for him, owning diners or owning real estate, he said: “It becomes the diner was a means for me to buy a hotel, and own it for twenty-five years and make stupid money on it.”¹⁰⁰ Without the diner, he could not have moved forward economically. The diner also presents itself as a way for immigrants to integrate their food culture into America. Tony Pertesis put it simply: “The reality is that people can make eggs, but they don’t want to. So they go to a diner to get them.”¹⁰¹ The people who are willing to make the eggs are always immigrants. But the immigrant groups that are willing to continue this

¹⁰⁰ Alatakis, interview by the author.

¹⁰¹ Pertesis, interview by the author.

work are changing. It used to be Jewish and Italian, then it became Greek, and now it is an industry in the hands of Central American and Latinx immigrants.

Tony and Leo see the future of diners in the hands of these newer immigrant groups, as does every single diner owner whom I spoke to. This was even the same for Mike Cioffi, owner of the Phoenicia Diner, who said that his kids would never want to take over his business because it is not the work they are interested in, so naturally he would look to his employees to continue the diner. The vast majority of diner employees, from busboys to cooks and chefs, are immigrants. This is the same with all of the diner owners I spoke to: they wouldn't have kitchen staff if it weren't for the newer waves of Mexican and Central American immigrants. Mike noted that "immigrants are the engine of our industry. There is no one that can, or wants to replace them. There is no one that is more determined or skilled."¹⁰²

¹⁰²Cioffi, interview by the author.

Conclusion

As Greek Americans leave the diner business behind, many of them sell their businesses to the most qualified people they know, and that tends to be the people who have worked for them for years. Nearly every single diner owner whom I spoke with told me that the future of the diner is in the hands of the Mexican and Central American immigrant population, who make up the vast majority of their employees and, in particular, their kitchen staff. This is because historically diner ownership, and food work at large, is driven by the influxes of immigrant groups entering the United States of America. This ethnic succession started with many Jewish, Irish and German diner owners and manufacturers, as they were some of the first immigrants to arrive in large numbers from the late 19th century to early 20th century. These immigrants were replaced by later waves of immigrants, such as Italians and Eastern Europeans, and over the years the diner passed to Greeks. It stuck with Greek Americans for many reasons, but as times change, so does ownership. Beginning in the late 20th century, the food industry in the Northeast has been dominated by Asians and Latinx.¹⁰³ Many Greek Americans are leaving the diner behind, and Mexican and Central American immigrants are taking over.

Many Mexican and Central Americans are gaining ownership of diners today by the same means Greek immigrants took over the industry. The reason why it is now Mexican and Central Americans instead of Greeks is because immigration to the United States has been dominated by this geographic area for the past decade. Mexican Americans started coming to the United States of America in exceedingly large numbers in 2000. In 2000, 9,177,5000 Mexicans migrated to the

¹⁰³Ray, "Ethnic Succession," 97

United States, and that number rose to 11,711,100 in 2010.¹⁰⁴ As of 2013, Latinx are the fastest-growing demographic group in the United States.¹⁰⁵ Diners, and the service and restaurant industry at large, are run by immigrants, primarily for the reasons that it is easy to work as kitchen staff with little to no English, and over any other demographic group in America, immigrants are willing to do this type of work since it means the chance for upward mobility. This newer influx of Mexican and Central Americans has offered an transition for other immigrant groups, such as Greek immigrants, to leave the service industry, as they no longer need it. Mexican and Central American diner owners started in the business the same way Greek immigrants did: first by working as a dishwasher or busboy behind the scenes, then with time working their way up to gain ownership. Now, nineteen or so years later they have worked in the kitchen long enough and their bosses, tired and ready to retire, hand the business over to who is most qualified.

Many Greek Americans these days are uninterested in diner ownership because in most cases their parents or grandparents have already used it to live their American Dream of economic independence and cultural integration. Now, it is less necessary to continue in the diner and restaurant industry. As more and more Greek Americans have economic stability, first generation Greek Americans want to retire and relax, and their children want to join the professional workforce. Today, many Mexican and Central Americans are in the same position that Greek Americans were in during the late 20th century. Many Central American immigrants are small business owners. In 2007 the U.S. Economic Census reported that Hispanics owned 2.3

¹⁰⁴ Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, "Mexican Immigrants in the United States," Migration Policy Institute, last modified October 11, 2018, accessed January 31, 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/mexican-immigrants-united-states>.

¹⁰⁵ Andrew K. Sandoval-Strausz, "Viewpoint: Latino Vernaculars and the Emerging National Landscape," *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 2, Project MUSE.

million businesses, 8.3 percent of the national total, and they are only growing.¹⁰⁶ The question now is, how will Mexican and Central American immigrants transform diner culture, if at all? If the pattern continues, more and more diners across the Northeast will, like the Bedford Diner, integrate various Mexican and Central American cuisines into their menus. But will the diner develop even more than that? If Mexican and Central Americans follow the path of Greek Americans, will the diners' architecture change? Will the interior style and decor change?

It is no surprise that the food and service industry is sustained by immigrant work and labor. In a report from The Chicago Council on Global Affairs in August of 2017, it was estimated that although immigrants account for only 13 percent of the United States population, they make up 31 percent of workers in the hospitality industry and 22 percent in the food service industry.¹⁰⁷ Immigrant entrepreneurs also add immense value to the growing economy, as they comprise 43 percent of owners of small hotels and motels, and 37 percent of small restaurant owners.¹⁰⁸ These numbers signify the importance of immigrant workers to the success of these industries. What would happen to the American economy if these immigrants were not a part of the service and hospitality industries? The American diner is just one example that highlights how immigrants are vital to the success of the food and service industry. Every diner owner that I spoke to discussed how the majority of their staff are immigrants, and I spoke to over a dozen people. It is clear who is keeping such industries, in this case diners, not only alive and running, but also continuously changing and evolving.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.* 9

¹⁰⁷ Sara McElmurry, *Heartland Hospitality: Serving the Needs of the Midwest Economy through Immigration*, 3, August 2017, accessed March 8, 2020, https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/report_immigration_hospitality_170824.pdf.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

The success of the American diner as a multiethnic and diverse space is a physical representation of how much immigrants have shaped diner culture. It is also a signifier of their positive integration into American society. When Italians first arrived in America, Americans rejected their cuisine. It took years for Italians to integrate their food into the fabric of everyday life.¹⁰⁹ Now, Italian food is considered American in many regards. This is the same for Greek immigrants, as at first no one wanted Mediterranean food, but now the literal “Mediterranean Diet” is one of the most popular diets for health conscious Americans.

Today, one of the most popular cuisines in America is Mexican food. Think of how successful Chipotle and Taco Bell are. As of April 2017, there are over 59,800 Mexican restaurants in the United States, its menu type representing approximately 9% of all restaurants. The Mexican menu type even surpassed Italian Pizzerias: Mexican came in second for most common non-simplified U.S. menu type, while Pizzeria came in third, with approximately 59,300 Pizzerias across the United States.¹¹⁰ Mexican cuisine is constantly growing in popularity and becoming an integral part of the American palate.

This integration of foodways is the case for every other immigrant group who has migrated to the United States as well. In most cases as immigrant groups live in the United States for extended periods of time, their identity becomes intertwined with that of the American one, and this multiculturalism is pushed forward by immigrants through the food industry. American food is grounded in ethnic cuisine, and is built by the stories and the immigrants behind it.

¹⁰⁹ Ray, "Ethnic Succession," 102

¹¹⁰ CHD Expert, "CHD Expert Evaluates the Mexican Restaurant Industry, the Second Most Popular Menu Type in the USA," CHD Expert, accessed May 2, 2020, https://www.chd-expert.com/blog/press_release/chd-expert-evaluates-mexican-restaurant-industry-second-popular-menu-type-usa/.

Foodways and American food culture are constantly evolving, and are changing on many levels, including state, city, and local. As immigrants continue to enter the country, food in America will continue to change. Because of the nature of this topic, I am still left with many questions. I wonder about the future of the Mexican and Central American owned diner, and I wonder if Greek diners will be sustained for years to come. Will the diner continue to evolve? Will we begin to see changes in the architecture and style of diners to reflect the ethnicities of the new Mexican and Central American owners? Or will Mexican and Central American owners maintain the greekness? I am curious to know where Greek Americans will go now that many are leaving the diner business. Will they greatly influence another profession or industry in America, and if they did, could it ever be as big as the Greek diner? Are more Greeks Americans staying in the food industry, but leaving diners, or are most leaving the industry altogether? I am curious to explore Greek restaurants that serve cuisine that is more authentic and in line with foodways of Greece. How have Greek Americans been finding themselves in this business? The idea of ethnic succession also leads me to believe that since Mexican and Central Americans are becoming small business owners and the new wave of diner owners, who will take their place in the labor force? Because of continued racism in this country and the particularly harsh and inhumane views towards immigrants in current political policy, I also wonder if Mexican and Central Americans will struggle more than other immigrant groups to gain upward mobility. I am curious to follow their stories and their foodways more closely, and learn more about American foodways in general. If I had time to turn this thesis into a book I would search to answer these questions. This work is not done, and my journey finding answers and following diner and immigrant culture will never be finished.

Diners have become very special to me throughout this project. Because of the relationship I discovered between them and immigrants, I see how important and vital they are in understanding American culture. Diners have become my new favorite place. I feel at home, welcomed, and a part of a community, when I am at one. I am happy that so many immigrants were able to find not only their economic stability but also their homes at diners. I am hopeful that diners will continue to be a space of comfort and quality for everyone, and a way for immigrants to make their way in America.

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Appendix

All of these photographs were taken by me during my time visiting diners and speaking with the owners. They are in order of appearance in the text.

Andros Diner. Fairfield, Connecticut. Leo Pertesis. January 12, 2020.





Johnny's Diner. Fairfield, Connecticut. Nick and Joanna Miralotis. January 9, 2020.



Dietz Stadium Diner. Kingston, New York. Elenie Loizou. January 24, 2020.





The Palace Diner. Poughkeepsie, New York. March 6, 2020

Pete's Famous Restaurant. Rhinebeck, New York. Maria Prodrowou and George Foukitzzis.
December 11, 2020.



The Eveready Diner. Hyde Park, New York. February 15, 2020.



Georgie's Diner. West Haven, Connecticut. Georgette Kapetenatas. January 13, 2020.



Phoenicia Diner. Phoenicia, New York. April 18, 2020





Broadway Lights Diner. Kingston, New York. March 19, 2020.

Oakhurst Diner. Millerton, New York. February 28, 2020.



The West Taghkanic Diner. Ancram, New York. March 14, 2020.





Southport Diner. Southport, Connecticut. Tony Pertesis. January 14, 2020.





The Acropolis Diner. Poughkeepsie, New York. March 6, 2020.

