

Negotiations in the Staging of the Country of Origin. A Transnational Study on Foreign Restaurants in Greater Valparaíso, Chile

Negociaciones en la puesta en escena del país de origen. Un estudio transnacional sobre restaurantes extranjeros en Gran Valparaíso, Chile

Carolina Pinto Baleisan,¹ Clément Colin² & Luz María Jeria Madariaga³

ABSTRACT

The article seeks to understand how migrant families bring life to restaurants that evoke their countries of origin. These spaces and culinary proposals are not a simple reproduction, but negotiated interpretations of culture itself during migration processes and are analyzed from a transnational approach. The methodology is based on interviews and participant observations carried out in four foreign restaurants located in Greater Valparaíso, Chile. The article contributes to the production of knowledge about migrants who have capital, exploring performances, symbols, and culinary practices that selectively show their national culture. It is concluded that these restaurants can be considered bridges between cultures by linking multiple scales with imaginaries, representations, and emotions. It articulates a discussion on ethnic economies, cultural transformations, and the production of evolving migrant identities while extending studies on recent migrations in Chile.

Keywords: 1. negotiation, 2. transnationalism, 3. foreign restaurants, 4. Greater Valparaíso, 5. Chile.

RESUMEN

El artículo busca comprender las maneras en que familias migrantes dan vida a restaurantes que evocan a sus países de origen. Estos espacios y propuestas culinarias no son una simple reproducción, sino interpretaciones negociadas sobre la propia cultura durante el proceso migratorio y se analizan desde un enfoque transnacional. La metodología reposa en entrevistas y observaciones participantes realizadas en cuatro restaurantes extranjeros ubicados en Gran Valparaíso, Chile. El artículo aporta a la producción de conocimientos sobre migrantes que disponen de un capital, explorando performances, símbolos y prácticas con las que ponen en escena de manera selectiva expresiones culinarias de sus países. Se concluye que estos restaurantes pueden considerarse como puentes entre culturas por vincular a escalas múltiples imaginarios, representaciones y emociones. Se articula una discusión sobre economías étnicas, transformaciones culturales y producción de identidades migrantes en devenir, a la vez que se extienden los estudios sobre migraciones recientes en Chile.

Palabras clave: 1. negociación, 2. transnacionalismo, 3. restaurantes extranjeros, 4. Gran Valparaíso, 5. Chile.

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¹ Universidad Viña del Mar, Chile, cpinto@uvm.cl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6806-2206h>

² Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Chile, clement.colin@pucv.cl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1886-3926>

³ Universidad Viña del Mar, Chile, ljeria@uvm.cl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0783-9485>



INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the results of a qualitative study carried out on restaurants that offer typical foods from the countries of origin of their owners. The idea is defended that the recipes, objects and performances expressed at these restaurants, as well as the migration histories of the owner families (all of these aspects converge in the idea of “foreign restaurant”), can be read from a transnational approach and they account for negotiated interpretations of how the country of origin is understood and represented in the society in which one now lives. These interpretations are not static, and partake of the social construction of migrations, of how they are perceived and experienced in the countries of destination, thus contributing to cultural transformations.

The emphasis on negotiation makes it possible to relativize the idea of community closedness that persists in studies on the production of migrant spaces, as well as the conceptual binarism with which the borders between “us” and “the others” are usually approached. Thus, our aim is to make visible a progressive and strategic appropriation of how the migrants’ own culture is conceived in their place of destination through the preparation of meals and the selection of significant national symbols, among others factors. This paper deals with foreign restaurants as spaces for the support and production of evolving migrant identities, these spaces revealing and expressing relationships in tension between the imaginaries of a national culture and the desire for home, between nostalgia for their origin and the future prospects in the place where migrants live now.

The discourses of these migrant families, as well as the performances they hold at their restaurants, have as their context and backdrop a recent and intense process of migratory diversification in Latin America. In Chile, the immigration rate almost doubled between 2014 and 2017, the figure reaching 1 492 522 migrants among its little more than 19 million inhabitants, in 2019 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística & Departamento de Extranjería y Migración, 2020). Currently, the countries of origin of this immigration flow account for the extension of an historical configuration of exchanges with the bordering countries of Peru, Argentina and Bolivia, as well as the recent reception of Caribbean populations arriving from Colombia, Haiti and Venezuela, and to a lesser extent from other countries in the world (Canales, 2019).

This research seeks to contribute to the field of study on recent migrations in Chile, in particular to two discussions. On the one hand, to the study of the production of practices, meanings and socio-spatial forms linked to migration from ethnographic approaches (Bonhomme, 2021; Stefoni, 2015; Imilan Ojeda, Márquez Belloni, & Stefoni Espinoza, 2015); from the case of restaurants, it contributes to the understanding of the construction of migrant identities in places of destination; we theorized on the staging and agency of its main actors, aimed at creating, communicating and representing “the culture of my country”, from the study of the discourses and assessments of restaurant owners, as well as from our own participant observations as diners. As in previous studies that serve as background, elements of both an internal dimension referring to the idea of home, as well as those of a public dimension aimed at diners and, more broadly, at the society in which they live, are taken into account.

On the other hand, this article participates in the discussion on culinary practices understood as objects of analysis for migration studies from a transnational perspective. In dialogue with other research in this line (Chan & Montt Strabucchi, 2020; Hirai, 2009; Imilan, 2014; Vásquez-Medina, 2016), we show how the negotiations of restaurant performances, their symbols and practices, reveal experiences, imaginaries and emotions characteristic to migration processes; likewise, they contribute in an essential way to the construction of national cuisines and imaginaries (García Mera, 2014; Giacomán Hernández, 2015; Aguilera Bornand, 2018).

Finally, it should be noted that the article contributes to the production and analysis of new empirical data by accounting for migrants who own investment capital, an aspect scarcely portrayed in research so far. It also contributes by generating greater openness, sensitivity and diversity within migration studies, moving away from traditional theoretical frameworks that reinforce the conceptual associations between migration, problem and victim (Knowles, 2021). Additionally, by studying the metropolitan area of Greater Valparaíso, Chile, this paper contributes to the production of knowledge on a scarcely explored urban territory of recent migratory diversification, in a context where most studies on migration focus on the capital or on the northern border areas of that country.

Our research was based on participant observations and in-depth interviews conducted at four restaurants between 2018 and 2019. Two of them are countries of origin representing the largest South-South migration dynamics in Latin America: one restaurant offers food from Colombia and the other from Venezuela. The other two restaurants emerge as expressions of globalized migrations from Asia, particularly from Korea and Pakistan, both of which are less numerous in the region. This article is organized in three stages. First, it addresses the main fields of literature to which the article contributes: on the one hand, in relation to the cultural and identity tensions expressed in migratory experiences, and on the other, in terms of culinary practices and restaurants as objects of sociocultural study and revealers of such tensions. In the second stage, the context of the study and the methodological strategy implemented are presented. Finally, results are discussed. Thus, this work explores the way in which foreign restaurants, the negotiations of their symbols, staging, practices and meanings, sustain and reflect the cultural tensions inherent in migration processes.

INTERACTION SPACES AND EVOLVING MIGRANT IDENTITIES

In these current times characterized by the globalization of economy and by transnational migrations, the construction of identities, both individual and collective, becomes complex, multiple and mobile (Bauman, 2007). Between that which is alike and that which is different, referencing the material and symbolic borders with “the Others” (Vera, Aguilera, & Fernández, 2018, p. 10), identity processes are increasingly fluid. Migratory experiences imply processes of identity reconstruction for those who go through them; these individuals undertake constant comparative exercises of temporal and spatial markers, between a there/before and a here/now (Granero, 2017). Women and men think of themselves in

relation to different territories at the same time (Lerma Rodríguez, 2016). Available transnational literature affirms that the reconfiguration of identities is inherent to migratory experiences, and that it is based on the numerous and diverse connections that migrants hold with their countries of origin, transit and destination, as well as other intermediate spaces, thus building multiple territorialities (Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Smith & Guarnizo, 1998; Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999).

This discussion emphasizes the experiences of simultaneity (Glick Schiller, 2003) and the implementation of multiple cross-border practices (Guarnizo, Portes, & Haller, 2003) that bring with them a permanent reconfiguration of social spaces (Ramírez, Chang, & Stefoni, 2021). Along this line, hereby we investigated restaurants established by migrant residents of Chile, where their experiences of simultaneity and activation of transnational and symbolic links give life to culinary and sensory experiences that at the same time function as a place out of place, as a meeting space with that which is their own, and as a showcase of their country of origin in the place of destination.

In Chile, a large part of the studies on migration have so far focused on the analysis of the migrant condition, on the need to create public policies from a rights-based approach, and on the consequences of precarious socioeconomic inclusion (Thayer, Córdova, & Ávalos, 2013; Doña-Reveco & Mullan, 2014; Navarrete-Yáñez, 2017; Doña-Reveco, 2016; Torres Matus, 2019; Stefoni & Stang, 2017; Baeza Virgilio, 2019). In the transnational sphere, authors have contributed theories on the reconfiguration of spaces of transit and destination by means of ethnographic approaches, revolving around the experiences of migrants, their interactions and the simultaneous articulation of economic, social and symbolic aspects that influence them (Bonhomme, 2021; Ramírez et al., 2021; Riquelme Gómez & Tapia Ladino, 2020; Landeros, 2020; Imilan Ojeda, Márquez Belloni, & Stefoni Espinoza, 2015; Stefoni, 2015).

So as to contribute to this line of work, this article covers a research gap regarding the construction of spatialities produced by migrants (restaurants in this case), wherein interactions and forms of coexistence between migrants and locals converge in a regional urban context of recent migratory diversification. The study of foreign restaurants and of the negotiations expressed there in terms of categories such as what is own, what is of the other or what is national, seeks to contribute to the questioning of essentialisms and the supposed closedness attributed to migrant communities in theoretical discussions on multiculturalism, urban spaces and ethnic communities (Berg & Sigona, 2013).

At the crossroads of migration studies, ethnicity and urban studies, Ramírez et al. (2021) point out that the contributions to ethnic economies and migrant enclaves have from their inception neglected the understanding of relational factors, and have generally focused on social problems. These authors indicate that these have contributed “to a pathologizing and reductionist view of the spatialities inhabited by migrants” (Ramírez et al., 2021, p. 18). To address this point, our research, like others mentioned above, understands how important it is to delve into the interactions, the relativization of the migrant-non-migrant dichotomy, and the spaces for negotiating the staging of a national culture. That is, it seeks to reveal the

symbolic and relational dynamics that migrants sustain with and in their restaurants, among themselves and with respect to other groups on different levels, as a way to contribute to the understanding of the identity construction processes of migrants, and in order to stress their fluidity and incompleteness (Márquez & Correa, 2015).

*The Foreign Restaurant: a Place of Performance,
a Meeting Place*

In this article, restaurants that sell food from other countries are seen as a material and social space built from the migratory experience, thus marking limits between what is alike and what is different, what is one's own and what is foreign, what is close and what is distant (Hirai, 2009; Vazquez-Medina, 2016). Their specific culinary knowledge is a valuable cultural capital: a knowledge deemed superior in terms of preparations perceived as unknown to locals, that rest on cultural representations and imaginaries, capable of progressively modifying local views and tastes (Möhring, 2018). At the same time, these spaces can be approached from their role as cultural markers of identity that satisfy demands for authenticity and consumption of otherness, updating the limits of the hosting nation (Vera, Aguilera, & Fernández, 2018).

In short, foreign restaurants are understood as spaces of production, reproduction and symbolic representation of the limits between national cultures, and referring to a particular country. They are the link between what is global and what is local; their culinary practices participate in identity constructions and strengthen the sense of belonging of those who make up one group (Giacoman Hernández, 2015). These practices can be seen as repertoires that bring cultural differences into play (Cook, Crang, & Thorpe, 1999) and that reproduce identity categories in local contexts (Dwyer & Crang, 2002).

Different works have shown that food and its associated performances constitute social and cultural objects that allow us to question our relationship with the world (Barthes, 1961; Levi-Strauss, 1965; Goody, 1982; Douglas, 1984; Counihan, Van Esterik, & Julier, 2013). In this literature, some authors are interested in culinary practices as cultural borders between social, ethnic or regional groups (Bourdieu 1979; Goody, 1982; Douglas, 1984; Appadurai, 1988); other thinkers focus on food as a contribution to the idea of nation (Caldwell, 2002; Mannur, 2007; Ferguson, 2010; García Mera, 2014; Matta, 2014; Aguilera Bornand, 2016, 2018). According to Fischer (1995), the arrival of foreigners influences national and local cultures, their representations and imaginaries, causing tensions to emerge in the ways of thinking and understanding food and, at the same time, introducing changes in the succession of dishes, flavors or ways of seasoning food.

In Chile, recent research has evidenced the transformations experienced in the country's cuisine, in the way it is perceived and defined, as a consequence of cultural and economic globalization. In particular, foreign cuisines have been mainly represented by Peruvian cuisine and its restaurants in the capital (Imilan, 2014; Imilan Ojeda, & Millaleo Hernández, 2015). This line of work highlights the abilities of foreign cuisine to build a home from food, as well as to gain recognition. Foreign restaurants, particularly Chinese

food restaurants, have also been studied through their ways of articulating and questioning the supposed identities linked to that country, taking into account the circulation of historical representations of and perceptions about China (Chan & Montt Strabucchi, 2020).

This article aims at building upon the contributions described above by investigating four restaurants that represent different countries, thus being able to compare and delve into the ways in which a foreign “national” cuisine is staged in a given country of residence. It is interesting here to highlight the negotiations that unfold around what is one’s own and what is different, by collating them to the existing imaginaries about the country of origin in the place of destination. The foreign restaurant generates a meeting place able to subvert what Sayad (2011) points out as the inferiorization of what is foreign. Thus, a dialogue is established with the work on Chinese restaurants by Chang and Montt Strabucchi (2020) by seeking to make visible the agency of migrants who selectively manage possibilities, experiences and knowledge to share their vision of Chinese national culture. This is intended a positive look that calls into question inconvenient imaginaries, a look made possible by means an ideal and non-problematic support, that is, food, which allows contributing to the recognition and legitimacy of the foreign restaurant.

On the other hand, seeking to further part of the reflections by Imilán and Millaleo (2015), our research identified two forms of expression of gastronomic migration, as those two authors did. The first refers to a set of strategies pertaining how intimate is the construction of the idea of home through food in migrant experiences; this point echoes the notions of emotional refuge and place of nostalgia explored in the study of Mexican restaurants in the United States (Hirai, 2009). This article is not interested in the ability of restaurants to bring together foreign co-nationals in search of familiarity, but rather in how the attributes of these restaurants enable, for their creators, a symbolic dialogue with themselves and their origin, with the memories and affections that continue to link them to the places where they were born and once lived. Paying attention to emotions is essential to understanding this inner dimension and encounter with their origin.

On the other hand, gastronomic strategies aimed at the public sphere are also identified, in which migrant identities are staged to communicate with others. From this perspective, this article makes use of the notion of performance so as to approach the ritual way in which the gastronomic culture of a country is expressed, since the preparations and symbols arranged in these restaurants are not an exact copy of how food is prepared in the places of origin. According to Schechner (2000), these staging practices are considered performances since they are restored or repeated human activities that follow norms external to them, but that are always different from one another because they are transmitted, taught and learned, not mere reproductions (Bianciotti & Ortecho, 2013).

By means of these references, this paper investigates the norms and symbolic frameworks that drive the attitudes and practices of the staff working at these restaurants, making visible agencies, subjectivities and transformations that are at the base of these very processes (Schechner, 2000). Finally, our research seeks to delve into the transformations and spaces

for change enabled at foreign restaurants to represent the culture of the country of origin, thus understanding their meanings and contexts, emphasizing the negotiation factor.

METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a qualitative approach whose field work combined participant observations and semi-structured interviews conducted at four foreign family-type restaurants in the metropolitan area of Valparaíso, Chile. These restaurants offer dishes from Venezuela, Colombia, Pakistan, and South Korea.

In order to contribute to the pool of research on ethnic economies and restaurants that emphasize intragroup relationships (Portes & Jensen, 1989), our study population is defined as family-type restaurants that offer foreign dishes, that is, dishes from a country different from the one their owners now live in; also, these restaurants emerge from recent migration flows in Chile. In other words, we focused exclusively on those that in their operation involve material, work and/or financial contributions of people considered members of a single family. In this sense, restaurants serving dishes considered “international” that do not pertain a single specific human mobility (such as Italian, Mexican, Chinese, or Cantonese food restaurants, or sushi bars), or that are elaborated by people descended from migrants. Food establishments from neighboring countries that are part of a long tradition of immigration in Chile, such as Peruvian or Argentine food restaurants, were also excluded.

The fieldwork was carried out between September 2018 and March 2019, favoring a progressive approach to restaurants and equitably involving the three authors of this article at each stage. Restaurants that met the definition were first identified by reviewing the business directory and conducting on-site verification visits. In a second stage, having selected a final group of eleven restaurants identified as possible participants, field work began with participant observation as clients and diners, this consisting of two visits by the researchers, culminating the last one with the formal invitation to the owners to participate in our research. Third, with the agreement of the participants and after signing informed consent, new observations and interviews were carried out in a total of six restaurants, establishing greater links with only four of them, which are portrayed here.

The participant observation process was based on the use of a guideline and a process of joint analysis of the written and photographic records produced in each visit, through successive work meetings. During observations as clients, attention was focused on describing the way in which a national gastronomy is staged, including everything that conveys this type of culinary experience: facilities, menus and dishes, as well as the service provided by the staff and the on-site interactions. Descriptions grew richer with each meeting by means of comparisons and discussion on the reference literature, each researcher sharing their impressions and experiences observed, and deciding each time if a new visit was suitable. This work process, in which progressiveness and joint assessment prevailed, accounts for the comprehension that this type of restaurant is experienced differently by each person, which is why dialogue is necessary to reach consensus on

interpretations. Between four and six observation visits were made to each restaurant, one, two or three researchers participating in each instance.

As for the interviews, these were held with the owners of each restaurant, who in turn are responsible for the menu offered there. Semi-structured technique was made use of, that is, following a guideline of open questions made by the research team or by an assistant. The people interviewed (Table 1) were almost always the same ones who received the research team at each visit. Quotations in this text are pseudonymized. An analysis of the thematic content of the interviews was then carried out, seeking to delve into the meeting points with the reflections made based on observations.

In conclusion, the empirical material presented below focuses on the observations made in restaurants on their recipes, decorations and culinary offer. It is also complemented and expanded by the discourses and explanations provided by restaurant owners. Although this article is mainly interested in their points of view, the text also refers to diners as a guiding element in their decisions. These inputs account for the negotiated interpretations of identity that reveal processes aimed at reconstructing their belonging in the country of destination, based on memories and particular experiences, as well as the choice and display of national symbols and the adoption of practices and menus with which they seek to surprise and seduce local preferences.

Table 1. Information on interviewees

Country of origin	Number of in-depth interviews	Interviewee role	Age	Years living in Chile
Colombia	2	owner/chef	46	5
Venezuela	2	owner/manager/chef	35	4
Korea	1	owner's son/manager	29	5
Pakistan	1	owner/chef	52	8

Source: Own elaboration, 2021.

The Staging of a National Culture

The four restaurants featured in our study are located in the metropolitan area of Greater Valparaíso, the second most important suburban area in the country for its economic dynamism and its almost one million inhabitants. As a port and seaside city, it is an urban agglomeration dedicated mainly to services and tourism. According to official records (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2018), the Valparaíso region has a low proportion of immigrants in relation to all its residents (2.3%), however, it stands out as one of the regions with the highest number of migrants in the country (40 166 residents of foreign nationality). The three countries of origin with the greatest representation in the region replicate the same configuration at the national level, being Venezuela, Colombia and Peru. It stands out, however, as an attractive residential alternative for migrant populations contrasting with the high costs of living and housing shortages in other cities in the north of the country or in the capital. The four restaurants are located in areas distant from each

other, but similar regarding their commercial vocation and high influx of public; they are located next to other food outlets and restaurants, both traditional and foreign. Although this type of location implies competition, it allows restaurants to receive mainly local clientele, that is, people who are passing by the area, and people who live and/or work nearby.

The visit of co-national diners in each case is referred to and perceived as occasional. Each restaurant's offer includes a weekly and affordable lunchtime menu, as well as an à la carte menu at dinner time and on weekends. Venezuelan and Colombian restaurants also open during the morning and part of the afternoon, seeking to attract clients in search of fruit juices, coffee or sweet dishes. Finally, it should be noted that the four locations are identified as low-price options on gastronomic websites such as TripAdvisor or Foursquare. Thus, these restaurants are spaces aimed at a wide public, offering foreign cuisine as a differentiating attribute.

According to the discourses of the owners of these foreign restaurants, they sell food because they consider it important themselves in their daily environment and that is why they want to make it known to their clientele. Thus, through cooking they express a willingness to share part of their knowledge and ways of seeing the world, this allowing them to particularly extol their positive attributes. This willingness contributes to carefully constructing a staging specifically aimed at the society in which they live; through it they hope to transmit their version of the culture of their country of origin, made possible by distance and by their life experiences.

Below, a description is provided of the significant elements of each restaurant's staging. These elements express the ways in which it is decided to represent a particular national gastronomic culture in a different country.

The Colombian restaurant, located on a busy street in Valparaíso, is not the only "foreigner" in the area. It stands out from those that offer Peruvian or Chinese food due to its bright colors, some light wear on its façade, and an expressive aesthetic. In their banners arranged on the sidewalk, they highlight dishes that remind of Colombia such as "Colombian arepas" (Photograph 1). Inside, the always-present smell and heat of a generous kitchen, with hot meats and fried foods. Conversations and cumbia or salsa music can be heard throughout the room. Television screens show the videoclip of the songs, wherein tropical landscapes, dances, happy faces, and slender bodies with dark skin are all-pervading. Elements of a traditional and colonial representation of the Caribbean in Latin American contexts come together (Landazábal Mora, 2018).

Photograph 1. Outside view of the Colombian restaurant



Source: Captured by the authors, 2019.

Photograph 2. Inside view of the Colombian restaurant



Source: Captured by the authors, 2019.

The atmosphere is dynamic, warm and relaxed, especially so when clientele is moderate. The interactions between those who work in the restaurant dominate the atmosphere of the place: between the owner (who handles the cash register and manages the place), a young waitress and the kitchen team (wearing uniform and visible through an interior window) (Photograph 2). Recreating ways of being and coexisting is key to establishing this environment. The staff chats with each other and with the clientele, smiling in a light mood, conveying a sense of relaxation and camaraderie. The walls, in addition to Colombian flags, display personalities and images of iconic places in the country. As the owner will later explain, it is all about presenting and transmitting the idea of a joyful, prosperous and peaceful Colombia, rich in happiness. Here we find the confrontation of imaginaries on the country of origin, as described by Chan and Montt Strabucchi (2020). This performance seeks to oppose the stereotypes about Colombia in Chile, which link the former to drug trafficking and violence (Gissi Barbieri, Pinto Baleisan, & Rodríguez, 2019).

Now, the Venezuelan restaurant is located in Viña del Mar and stands out right from its street view due to a large flag that hangs between the door and front window. You can also read the menu and other suggestions for dishes described as Venezuelan on the outside walls (Photograph 3). Inside, the atmosphere is relaxed and conveys a sense of trust between staff and clientele. The décor is rather neutral, highlighting a single motif on the walls: a mural painted in bright colors. It shows a white and vertical city surrounded by exuberant vegetation, looked at from a distance by a female figure above whom a Venezuelan flag floats (Photograph 4).

Photograph 3. Outside view of the Venezuelan restaurant



Source: Captured by the authors, 2019.

Photograph 4. Inside view of the Venezuelan restaurant



Source: Captured by the authors, 2019.

The service provided by the manager and by a young woman is friendly and cordial. They both wear casual clothes. Conversations and laughter can be heard in the back space where the kitchen is located. The identity performance here is enacted by means of national symbols of the country of origin, arranged inside the restaurant and present at all times when being serviced. For example, many of the ingredients and preparations are explained

as traditionally Venezuelan, and they also offer a dessert decorated with a flag. In the initial conversations, as well as in the interviews, the person in charge underlined the good reception that Venezuelan cuisine has in Chile, understood as the extension of a good disposition towards this immigration flow, which echoes the speeches of the Chilean government that in that year implemented a preferential visa for Venezuelans. The person in charge describes this good reception and interest in Venezuelan cuisine as a “hand in return” (an act of aid given in reciprocity) compared to when Venezuela welcomed thousands of Chilean men and women during the Pinochet dictatorship.

As for the Korean restaurant, it is located in Quilpué and can be identified by a sign in English and an aesthetic of clean lines, described as minimalist and Asian-inspired (Photo 5). Inside, the music is soft and low. On the terrace you can only hear the sound of water from a fountain. Table service is done with a cart in a quiet and discreet manner, and there are two waiters, a woman and a man, apparently Chilean, tall and thin, dressed in a stylized black uniform.

Photograph 5. Outside view of the Korean restaurant, looked at by one its owners



Source: Captured by the authors, 2019.

The owner family is permanently in sight, in an attitude homologous to the place: silent, solemn and reserved. The son supervises the table service, the father prepares the dishes in the kitchen and goes out to put them in the cart, while the mother sits at the corner of the main room, doing paperwork. The performance of identity is expressed both in the objects and the atmosphere of the place, as it happened at the other restaurants we investigated; here, Korean identity rests on stylization and a certain seriousness in the interactions with the clientele, and also in the corporalities of those who participate in the service.

The Pakistani restaurant is also located in Quilpué, in a house similar to others on its street, but which stands out for its bright green façade featuring striking signs with the name of the restaurant on them (Photograph 6).

Photograph 6. Outside view of the Pakistani restaurant



Source: Captured by the authors, 2019.

Pakistan's culture is expressed in flags, drapes in different formats, pictures and allusive decor hanging from the walls in all rooms and corridors. This restaurant stands out from the rest in that here they both exhibit and sell traditional clothing and jewelry typical of the country, which are preferably offered by the Pakistani chef and owner. Waiters are Chilean, who warn and provide advice to the clientele when choosing the level of spiciness of the preparations. A large part of the identity performance sought to be shared here revolves around the persona of the owner, who creates opportunities to interact with the clientele and does not hide his accent when speaking in Spanish; through his expressive actions and the abundant explanations on how things are over there or how they are done, the authenticity of the place and the exacerbation of cultural distance are put into play.

Summarizing, in the four restaurants we studied, their owners reproduce and reinterpret flavors, personalities and places from their countries of origin. They process their memories and experiences so as to interpret the wishes of the local clientele; from their own perspectives, they rework how they imagine their countries of origin to be. It is an interpretive and performative process for which the foreign restaurant mobilizes multiple and multisensory forms (Gibson, 2007), that is to say, this process is not exhausted in the tasting of the food: it stimulates all the senses. In terms of symbols, these restaurants participate in an economy of signs sustained by the migrants' nostalgia, effecting an economic impact on the destination society, as well as on cultural practices and on the representation of identities (Hirai, 2009). In a wider sense, they express a reterritorialization of the culture of origin (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997) in the country of destination, and evidence a simultaneous incorporation: their owners continue their relationship with the country of origin without neglecting participation in their current local life (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). A simultaneous incorporation that is not without tensions.

Identity Tensions and Borders in the Foreign Restaurant

As stressed by Márquez and Correa (2015), migrant identities are always fluid and evolving. They constantly feed on reinterpretations of culture and society, as well as of what is individual and what is local. This can be confirmed by inquiring on the origin of the recipes and the symbols presented as national in foreign restaurants, which are based on the experiences of their owners and on their personal learning anchored in specific territories. For example, the chef and owner of the Pakistani restaurant explains that the culture he represents there and the one he belongs to is Sindhi culture, one of the five cultures of Pakistan, where different languages are spoken.

Something similar happens in the Colombian restaurant. Its owner points out that the menu there focuses on the Paisa community, very extended in the region where he was born, Antioquia. References to his past and origins in the interviews are accompanied by expressions of nostalgia towards the life he knew before migrating. These are complex processes in which memories linked to food play an essential role (Sutton, 2001; Holtzman, 2006). The Pakistani chef points out “I miss my country all the time, I talk to my family every day. [In the restaurant] I feel like I am in Pakistan, live in Pakistan, I feel that” (Tariq, personal communication, December 7, 2018).

He then negotiates between his wish to share intimate knowledge of his homeland and the staging of broader symbols and practices about the country to be referenced, which could resonate meaning to the clientele. Diners seek to recognize at least part of their imaginaries about the country of reference when visiting the restaurant, and those imaginaries may or may not match the personal ideas of the owners. In the end the staging will work as long as it allows its creators to connect with their own memories, knowledge and experiences.

Another form of negotiation has to do with how can one effectively replicate a cuisine in a geographical location different from its original one. The stories about the favorite dishes of each restaurant allowed us to investigate the culinary variations that reluctantly divert from their authors’ demands of authenticity. The Colombian Paisa tray is made with Chilean sausages from Chillán. Korean dishes had to adapt to the fish found on the cold Chilean coast. Pakistani recipes, meanwhile, are made with a different spice, considering the spices available in Chile. According to the interviews, many transformations are linked to a geographical and material context, but others also have to do with the need to adapt to the preferences of local consumers who want to taste something different, but only to a certain extent. Faced with this situation, everyone adapts their culinary offer in a trial-and-error fashion. For this, they rely on the knowledge acquired on the tastes of Chileans—as they are their main clientele—, thus revealing advanced ways of integrating into this Chilean society that they recognize and experience on a daily basis.

These processes imply a production and staging of food that references multiple attachments, places, memories (Duruz, 2010), and therefore to different forms of identity construction, which subtly relativize the categories “we” and “them”, or “own” and “foreign”.

This connection and interplay between here and there that characterizes transnational experiences (Waldinger, 2008) also has a limit in restaurants, not only in terms of ingredients, but above all in terms of the meaning given to culinary preparations. As suggested earlier, there is strong resistance on the part of owners to recipe adaptations. The Colombian restaurant reflects this situation:

A lot of Chilean clients have tried, for example, sancocho (...) they say is spectacular, that's got a super delicious touch. We prepare it with two or three meats, green banana was another ingredient that was hard to find here. You can't have sancocho without green banana, landrace potato, cassava, which are products that we get from Colombia (Sara, personal communication, October 23, 2018).

Thus she shared with joy and pride how appreciated her cuisine is by locals. Experiencing these feelings prevent her from honoring certain requests for changes in the way dishes are served:

A number of times they have told us: "can I have the salad on the side?" And one would tell them: "Sure, I can serve it on the side, only this is a Colombian restaurant and the concept is that food is served and eaten as in Colombia. So, if you visit us and eat like we do, you take something of our culture with you" (Sara, personal communication, October 23, 2018).

The owner of the Colombian restaurant, as well as the owners of the other restaurants studied here, face and workaroud a permanent tension. In the quotation above, the limit is set by rules and conventions that cannot be ignored without modifying the meaning given to the meal that is offered. This idea can also be recognized in the different representation of what can be considered a fresh fish in the case of the Korean restaurant. The owners do not want to serve a special preparation based on fish, since they consider that this ingredient is not sold fresh enough in Chile as they can get it in Korea. This reasoning, common to the four restaurants, expresses once more the tensions in the borders between "us" and "the others".

According to their discourses, the interviewees value their respective culinary cultures, sometimes sharing a critical view of the culinary practices of the host country, Chile. For them, this entails revaluing self-esteem in their position as migrants, and legitimizing themselves as producers of this showcase or view into the migrants' country of origin. In this sense, foreign restaurateurs reveal a process of identity negotiation expressed in the reinterpretation and reinvention of dishes and their staging, based on previous knowledge and on experiences lived in Chile. These expressions have limits so as not to be diluted, and achieve a marker effect by making use of cultural symbols of the country of origin; in this way, restaurateurs address a specific need of the restaurant by allowing not only to channel the experiences of the clientele, but also to sustain an intelligible and coherent framework of meaning for themselves.

The Foreign Restaurant as part of a Transnational Migration Project

The foreign food restaurant can be defined, in the words of Said (1999), as a “place out of place”. It is not only constituted as a place in reference to another and that, in this sense, combines symbols, spatialities and diverse temporalities; it is also concretely based on a migratory, family and collective project that mobilizes different types of resources in the territories thus put in contact. The restaurant gives life to a transnational migration project that is sustained by family decisions and anchored in a permanent “in-between”.

The desire for change is a key element in understanding the onset of the migration projects of restaurant owners. As in other research available on middle-class migration (Wihtol de Wenden, 2013; Pinto Baleisan, 2017), these projects can be identified as based on imaginaries about life in other countries, as well as on a set of cognitive, social, cultural, and material resources that allow for migration to take place. Miguel, an IT professional of Venezuelan nationality who works as a manager and cook in the restaurant located in Viña del Mar, describes his experience, thus exemplifying this desire for change idea:

I was a little tired of that city life (in Caracas) and I wanted a change of scenery, and the economic and political situation we had also forces you to leave (...) I had been working for twelve years in the same thing, basically my decision was like a breath of fresh air, I came from going through a tough personal situation and I wanted to make a clean slate and reinvent myself. And I told my sister (who already lived in Chile), yes, count on me (Miguel, personal communication, November 16, 2018).

Due to personal events and the conviction of facing an adverse context, the desire for change is resolved with the decision to migrate, and so the destination country is also seen as a fertile ground to change oneself. In the four cases analyzed, the family restaurant made possible a successful professional reconversion, since none of the owners had a long career or formal studies in the culinary field in their own country, only hobby approaches or a first attempt in the world of restaurants. While the Korean family traveled to Chile already owning capital with the explicit aim of opening their food business, in the other three cases a more progressive start-up process was identified, as owners carried out other related activities first in the country that allowed them learning about the culinary offer in Chile, later opening their own restaurants.

This type of business then serves as a tool that provides sustenance and legitimacy to the personal and labor change experienced in migration. However, transforming national belonging into an economic resource also requires knowing the destination very well. In the cases studied, the participation of family members who already lived in or knew in depth the culture of the host country was decisive. They made it possible to bring closer the imaginary and ways of eating in a distant land, and thus provided a firmer foundation for the business plan. In the Pakistani and Venezuelan restaurants, extended family members of Chilean nationality contributed to establishing the restaurants. This is explained by mixed

marriages. The account of the Venezuelan food restaurant's manager provides a view into the family configuration that allowed this activity to be undertaken.

I managed to send a little capital abroad (...) I transferred that money to my sister so that hers and my [Chilean] brother-in-law's money could be put together and they could start the business. So it was a little-by-little work of ants, we made it happen, my sister and brother-in-law are well organized in it (Miguel, personal communication, November 16, 2018).

The sister of the Venezuelan restaurant's manager holds a highly qualified job position in Chile and is married to a Chilean man of the same profession as her. The manager of the restaurant insists that "it was he [his brother-in-law] who, together with my sister, organized and devised the project to find a place for me and my mother at that time" (Miguel, personal communication, November 16, 2018).

The restaurant then becomes a transitional space favoring the economic insertion of different members of the same extended family, participating in support structures among co-ethnics (Ramírez et al., 2021). However, the fact that restaurants are a more fluid and heterogeneous space than one might think stands out, since those who support them do not necessarily have the same nationality or the same life experiences in the countries of origin and destination.

The case of the Pakistani restaurant owner also confirms this fluid configuration. He worked as a driver in Pakistan and came to Chile over eight years ago because a close friend, who was appointed to the former Pakistani embassy in Chile, recommended that he come. He began to work as a cook for this friend of his and later at a restaurant in the capital; there he met his current partner, Karina, a Chilean woman whom he later married. After a few years, the idea came about of opening a Pakistani restaurant in Valparaíso, his wife's region of origin. The support of their extended family was essential for the project, as Karina relates in our interview with her:

In 2015 we discussed it with my brother and my sister, who is a food engineer, and after thinking about it for a long time, we thought that since we had a cook we could offer something different here in the region, and each one contributed their money and furniture and we started (Karina, personal communication, December 7, 2018).

The foreign restaurant appears then as a common project developed "here" but referencing "there", and that is sustained by multiple material and symbolic exchanges between the countries of origin and residence (Levitt, 2001; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). It is at this point that we can see how Chilean family members contributed to establishing three of the four restaurants studied here. In addition to contributing capital, they also provided practical knowledge on the clientele and the customs of the place, aspects that are essential for a successful operation. This "in-between" position—between here and there—contributes to and participates in the interpretation and staging of an original national culture in the country of migrant destination.

CLOSING REMARKS

This research confirms that migrant identities are always under construction, as there is no single one Venezuelan, Colombian, Korean or Pakistani cuisine, but rather a cuisine of its own that was known in a region and learned as such. Later, this knowledge is transformed by being performed at a restaurant located in Chile that seeks to reach a local clientele. Thanks to distance, migrants appear in this role as experts on or representatives of their country, creating value and legitimacy towards their knowledge and ways of seeing the world.

The way in which migrant cuisines unfold in the intimate dimensions of restaurants includes the expression of emotions such as pride or nostalgia, with which the stories of the dishes, decorations and menus are explained. It is through this type of places that restaurant owners meet with their origins. Recognizing these emotions allows the observer understanding the enjoyment they express for living and working like this. As for the public dimension, that is, by transmitting culinary knowledge to others, foreign restaurants challenge former imaginaries on their countries of origin. For that, they rely not only on food but also on the staging of a national culture through personalities, symbols, crafts and music that complement and contextualize the sensations evoked by their cuisine.

These foreign restaurants are also meeting places, as they cater mainly to a local clientele and move away from the idea of community closedness. For this reason, they are privileged supports for studying negotiations on how what is different and what is unique is presented and staged. Their recipes and preparations are not static, they are in permanent dialogue and negotiation with the availability of products and the preferences of the local clientele. These negotiations rest on the sensitivity and advanced knowledge about the clientele that the owners have, owners who despite their expectations of authenticity reinvent dishes and ways of getting to know their country. On the other hand, these restaurants turned out to be economic projects that took several years to develop, whose intermediate learnings have revealed negotiations and material contributions to migrant and non-migrant members of the same family who participated in what is known as migrant reception structures.

At the restaurant, negotiations between “us” and “them”, between “what is ours” and “what is foreign”, are not only stressed by the decisions made by their owners about how to represent the culture of their country of origin, but also by the experiences and personal transformations, as well as the imaginaries that exist in the destination society about the country referenced by the restaurants. In this sense, the foreign restaurant shows a balance that every individual negotiates between the need to remember their origin, preserving the meanings associated with their own culture, and putting them on stage to convey them to others.

Summarizing, the foreign restaurant can be understood as a place-bridge between cultures. It is not exhausted in an exact reproduction of a “there” but “here”; neither in the idea of an acculturation, or an assimilation into the existing imaginaries and preconceptions

prevalent in the destination country. It can be thought of as a constantly developing meeting, that is, as a space for negotiation and belonging permeated by senses, meanings, emotions, and both individual and collective experiences (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). The foreign restaurant brings to light a different cultural space, complex and fluid, in continuous evolution (Rampazi, 2016), in which an ongoing reinterpretation of the past and present is played, connecting distant spatialities, performances and symbols.

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