

# Salad Bowl Suburbs

Global Food Geography in Charlotte, N.C....and beyond.

By Tom Hanchett

Written for John T. Edge, Elizabeth Engelhart & Ted Ownby, *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013).



Exploring foodways can open up fresh perspectives on wider society. In my neighborhood along Central Avenue in Charlotte, North Carolina, ethnic restaurants and grocery stores started popping up in the 1990s. Today at the corner of Central and Rosehaven, you can park your car amid a jumble of little shopping plazas and walk to a Vietnamese grocery and two Vietnamese restaurants, a Mexican grocery and a taqueria, a Salvadoran deli and two Salvadoran eateries, a Somali restaurant and grocery and an Ethiopian bar/restaurant/nightclub, and a Lebanese grocery/restaurant. It's a delightful place to sample unfamiliar cuisines, but it turns out to be also an exciting window on a whole new urban geography. In fast-growing Southern metropolitan areas such as Charlotte, and less visibly in older cities as well, people are creating what might be called "salad bowl suburbs" – a new mixed up, tossed salad of cultures. Look around your city. Do you see it, too?

## Not melting pot, not Chinatown, but a salad bowl

So often we see what we expect to see. For generations, a couple of mental models dominated discussion of ethnicity in U.S. cities. One was the melting pot. The other was the image of ethnic enclave, Chinatown, Little Italy and the like, which scholars elaborated into the notion of urban ecology, a narrative of inevitable "invasion and succession." Let's look first at those ideas before moving on to what is actually happening today.

The melting pot is one of the most cherished metaphors of American culture. It harks back to the steel mills of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries where iron ore, coke and other raw inputs came together at intense temperatures in giant cauldrons called crucibles. Poured out and cooled, the resulting steel was a new material, stronger than any of its components. What a wonderful image for this land nation whose motto is “one from many,” *e pluribus unum*. Hector Crèvecoeur, a French writer visiting America, called attention to the melting effect as early as 1782, “Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.”<sup>1</sup> The melting pot seems to have become the dominant metaphor around 1900 as photographs of red-hot crucibles in the rolling mills of Pittsburgh appeared in the era’s new illustrated magazines and photogravure sections of newspapers.

Implicit in the melting pot image is the notion that immigrants must lose the cultures they brought with them and instead create a new uniformly American culture. “Understand that America is God’s Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming! Here you stand ... in your fifty groups, your fifty languages, and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries. But you won’t be long like that, brothers.... Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American.” So wrote Israel Zangwill in his play, *The Melting Pot*, 1909.<sup>2</sup>

That date coincided with America’s largest immigrant wave. Beginning in the 1850s and gathering momentum into the 1910s, the United States experienced a growing tide of new arrivals that defined the nation we know today. It also generated intense fear. Would existing American culture be drowned out? The new profession of social work, the increased push for universal public education, and the rise of scholarly fields such as urban sociology were just a few of the responses as people sought to understand what was going on and help Americanize the newcomers. Ultimately in 1917 and 1924 strict laws halted nearly all immigration except from areas deemed culturally safe such as England.

The arrivals who streamed into American cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to settle in distinct neighborhoods. Some of that resulted from natural tendencies for people of like language and foodways to cluster and help each other out. But the dominant society also played a huge role. Real estate professionals united to refuse to sell or rent to particular ethnic groups. Restrictive covenants, a legal tool inserted into deeds to limit who could buy or occupy the land, became commonplace by the 1890s. The practice of zoning, spread during the 1920s, reinforced those boundaries. The upshot was a pattern of ethnic enclaves. Chinatown, Little Italy, Greektown, the Barrio – and also African American districts – all became accepted and expected in big cities.

Scholars in the emerging fields of sociology and urban geography unconsciously reinforced those assumptions. Robert Park and Ernest Burgess at University of Chicago sketched out a concentric ring theory of urban growth.<sup>3</sup> Immigrants settled first in inner city tenement neighborhoods. Then as they moved up economically, they moved outward physically,

---

<sup>1</sup> Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, “What is an American?” *Letters from an American Farmer* (New York: Fox, Duffield and company, reprint 1904), pp. 51-56.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Isaac B. Berkson, *Theories of Americanization, A Critical Study* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1920), p. 73.

<sup>3</sup> Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess and Roderick D. McKenzie, eds, *The City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925). On current opinions of the models proposed by Park, Burgess and their Chicago colleagues, see for instance Wilbur Zelinsky, *Enigma of Ethnicity: Another American Dilemma* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001).

further and further into the suburbs. Colleague Roderick McKenzie elaborated on this model, noting that in highly segregated Chicago, groups seemed to “invade” a neighborhood, crowding out all other ethnic groups much in the way that a new plant species can crowd out others as grassland matures into a forest.<sup>4</sup> He coined the term “invasion and succession,” which not only matched what people were indeed seeing, but had an attractive air of scientific inevitability that came from nature’s ecology – a natural law of cities.

The image of invasion and succession became a self-fulfilling prophecy. If people thought that “once strangers move in, we will be forced out,” then they became likely to flee at the first sight of ethnic neighbors. The federal government threw its weight behind the idea when it wrote up regulations for the new Federal Housing Administration in 1938. This hugely influential program insured banks that made long-term loans to homeowners – something that sounds boring and esoteric, but in actuality defined the shape of American cities. FHA regulations required that neighborhoods must be protected against “being invaded” by “incompatible racial and social groups.”<sup>5</sup> The result in every U.S. city was a landscape of tightly defined neighborhoods set apart by race, ethnicity and income.

The odd thing about the melting pot, though, was that when you looked closely, it did not actually describe what was happening. Immigrants’ children and grandchildren did indeed give up much of their old culture, but they kept some things. Food, for example. Italians continued cooking pasta and making spaghetti sauce for dinner, even if they might munch an all-American hotdog for lunch. And to continue the Italian example, some exotic ethnic foods such as pizza and lasagna were adopted by their neighbors and came to seem thoroughly American.

As early as the 1950s, scholars struggling with this reality began searching for a better metaphor. What if, instead of a melting pot, we talked about America as a salad bowl? Carl Degler, one of the era’s foremost U.S. historians, coined the term in a 1959 book.<sup>6</sup> In a salad many ingredients come together to create a new dish, each bite mingling different flavors. Other excellent ideas have been suggested along this line. Perhaps a stewpot is more accurate than a salad bowl, since the process of “cooking together” over time in this new land does indeed change each of us. Or maybe a potluck would be a useful image, since we each bring something different to the table, but tend to take onto our own plates what we choose based on our pre-existing notions of what might taste good. I like all of those, but salad bowl seems to have caught on most widely, so we’ll use that here. And it does sound good next to “suburb.”

### **Charlotte’s East Side – from lily white to racially and economically mixed**

In the description of Central Avenue at the start of this essay, you may have caught a bit of wonder in my voice. This whole multi-ethnic thing is new to Charlotte. Like most cities in the southeastern U.S., Charlotte had very few foreign born residents a generation ago. In that last immigrant wave a century earlier, newcomers gravitated to the big industrial cities of the northeast and Midwest and to the wide-open farmland of the Great Plains. The South, in

---

<sup>4</sup> McKenzie, R.D. 1924. "The Ecological Approach to the Study of the Human Community." *American Journal of Sociology*. 30: 287-301.

<sup>5</sup> FHA *Underwriters Manual*, quoted in Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 208.

<sup>6</sup> Carl N. Degler, *Out of Our Past: The Forces that Shaped Modern America* 3rd ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1984), p. 332, originally published in 1959.

contrast, struggled with poverty in the aftermath of the Civil War. New cotton mills did string like beads along the mainline of the Southern Railway, with Charlotte as a major trading hub for the emerging textile region by the 1920s. But in comparison to the vast steel plants of Pittsburgh or stockyards of Chicago, the South's cotton mills were small and they were able to pull all the labor they needed from southern hills and mountains without seeking immigrants from abroad. In other words, this was a region of native born white people and native born black people, with hardly any Asians or Italians or eastern Europeans. When I first came to Charlotte in 1981 it was difficult for this Chicago boy to find an acceptable slice of pizza, much less something as exotic as a bagel.

Obviously things have changed drastically, setting the stage for the intermingling I have hinted at. Before we delve into that, though, we need to go back into the deeper history of Central Avenue. What I did not realize until I began this research was how the Central Avenue corridor had evolved before I first saw it in 1981. Like nearly all of urban America, no one planned Central Avenue. The way it developed over many decades made it an especially welcoming place for newcomers seeking a better life.

In 1899 developers George Stephens and F.C. Abbott laid out the first suburb on Charlotte's east side, Piedmont Park, straddling an old farm lane.<sup>7</sup> They grandly renamed the road Central Avenue, since it ran through the center of their subdivision, and they made it wide to hold the track of the streetcar line that would carry commuters back and forth to downtown. They inserted restrictive covenants in the lot deeds, stipulating a minimum house cost and residence by Caucasians only. A few big houses went up in the first blocks of Central Avenue during the 1900s, and a few more followed in the 1910s along The Plaza, heart of the next suburb to the east. But other sectors of town proved more attractive to Charlotte's leading families, and by the 1920s the city's East Side along Central Avenue was a comfortable middling residential area, neither rich nor poor.

In addition to these early white-collar subdivisions, another neighborhood helped defined Charlotte's East Side. Belmont-Villa Heights, a blue-collar district, sprang up just off Central Avenue around the Louise cotton mill in the years around 1900. As America moved into the prosperous post World War II decades of the mid-twentieth century, textile workers and their descendants began moving away from the mills. The East Side was often where they went.

During the 1950s through 1970s, dozens of new suburban subdivisions strung outward along Central Avenue for its entire four-mile length. Small one-story houses, usually well under 1000 square feet at the beginning of the era, intermingled with duplexes and other modest rental properties. Over time, houses in each new subdivision became a little bigger. The upward economic fortunes of the initial families, plus Charlotte's general growth which attracted transplants from all over the nation, pushed dwellings into the 2000 square foot range by the 1970s.

---

<sup>7</sup> For more on Charlotte growth history, see Thomas Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1870s – 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). Thomas Hanchett, "Salad Bowl Suburbs: A History of Charlotte's East Side and South Boulevard Immigrant Corridors," in William Graves and Heather Smith, eds, *Charlotte, NC: The Global Evolution of a New South City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), pp. 246 – 262.

Below and next page, small houses circa 1940s gave way to bigger ranch-house dwellings by the 1950s, culminating in split-levels in the 1960s and 70s.







By that time the Central Avenue corridor was attracting major multifamily development. A vogue for “apartment communities” took hold nationwide during the 1960s – 1980s. Groupings of two- and three-story buildings set in attractive landscaping, often with swimming pools and club-houses, were advertised to young professionals. Central Avenue and its vicinity got more of these than perhaps any other part of town.



Above, early duplexes intermingled with single-family homes during the 1950s and 1960s. Below, garden apartments became common in the 1970s and 1980s.



Businesses followed the general suburban trend. Central Avenue's initial stores clustered near where the Central Avenue streetcar turned onto The Plaza in the 1920s. During the 1950s and 1960s, small strip plazas marched further out Central, groups of two or three stores facing a parking lot. In 1975 the East Side unexpectedly gained a grand regional shopping center, Eastland Mall. Three major department stores anchored two levels of specialty shops plus an ice



skating rink and a new adventure in dining, Charlotte's first food court. Some observers wondered how this big facility could compete with just-opened Southpark Mall in Charlotte's rich southeast sector. But to most people Eastland Mall gave comfortable assurance that this once humble side of town had really arrived.

Charlotteans regarded the East Side in general and Central Avenue in particular as a very good place to live and do business. Its mix of housing choices welcomed for young families and people moving up economically into the middle class. By no means was it Charlotte's elite district; that was the southeast, out beyond the mill owners' 1910s garden suburb of Myers Park. Nor was it the black side of the town. Real estate practices and deed restrictions pushed African Americans to the north and west of Charlotte from the 1900s into the 1960s. Indeed as late as 1960, census data showed that all the neighborhoods along Central Avenue were nearly 100% white.

The East Side felt tremors of racial change in the late 1960s. As federally funded "urban renewal" demolished black neighborhoods near downtown, landlords decided that Belmont-Villa Heights would house many of the displaced families. The old mill district abruptly switched from all-white to nearly all-black. It seemed a classic case of the natural law of invasion and succession, just as scholars had laid out. Would all of the Central Avenue corridor soon become African American?

Attitudes toward race were changing in the 1960s, however. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which forbade discrimination in public places, is well known. Less familiar is the Fair Housing Act of 1968 which mandated "equal housing opportunity" in all rentals and sales. In 1977 the Community Reinvestment Act required banks to lend to homebuyers in every neighborhood without regard to race. None of these were magic potions, and much inequality remained, but in retrospect it is now clear that the overall effect was to chip away at age-old segregation patterns. Racial mixed neighborhoods began to come into existence and enjoy a fair amount of stability over time. The old urban ecology of white flight, invasion and succession, no longer automatically applied.

In Charlotte, civic leaders made a point of welcoming integration, especially after the local schools became the national test case for court-ordered busing, the Supreme Court case *Swann v Charlotte-Mecklenburg*, 1971. In 1970 Charlotte ranked as the United States' fifth most-segregated city.<sup>8</sup> By 2000, it had become the nation's second *least* segregated urban place. Given the reputation of the American South as the nation's hotbed of racial apartheid, this turn-about was indeed remarkable.<sup>9</sup>

You could see that racial transformation up-close on the East Side.<sup>10</sup> U.S. Census data for the six census tracts that lined Central Avenue counted them nearly 100% white in 1960. By

---

<sup>8</sup> Annemette Soresen, Karl E. Taeuber, and Leslie J. Hollingsworth, *Indexes of Racial Segregation for 109 Cities in the United States, 1940 to 1970, with Methodological Appendix* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, Institute for Research on Poverty, 1974), table 1.

<sup>9</sup> Lois M. Quinn and John Pawasarat, "Racial Integration in Urban America: A Block Level Analysis of African American and White Housing Patterns," [www.uwm.edu/Dept/ETI/integration/integration.htm](http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/ETI/integration/integration.htm). See also John Woestendeik and Ted Mellnik, "Fewer People Living in Racial Isolation, Mecklenburg More Diverse, More Integrated," *Charlotte Observer*, April 5, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population and Housing: 1960 Census Tracts PHC (1)-24*, Charlotte, N.C. SMSA (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961), pp. 13 -46; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Housing: 1960 City Blocks HC (3)-293*, Charlotte, N.C. SMSA (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961), pp. 1-28; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population and Housing: 1970 City Blocks HC (3)-165*, Charlotte, N.C. Urbanized Area SMSA (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), pp. 2-42;



1970 Belmont-Villa Heights was on its way to being all-black, but other neighborhoods had not budged. In 1980 the data showed the Plaza-Midwood neighborhood adjacent to Belmont-Villa Heights now 77% white, 29% black. Was it tipping? No, there it froze. Through the 1990s and beyond, Plaza Midwood remained close to the city-wide ratio of 79% white, 20% black. And so did the other tracts along Central. Except for Belmont-Villa Heights, every neighborhood was between 71% and 86% white by 1990.

As the 1990s dawned, the East Side remained a sought-after swath of suburbia. All of Central Avenue was now technically inside the city; state laws throughout much of the South make it easy for cities to annex outlying territory, so unlike in metro areas such as New York or Chicago, suburbs here seldom became separate incorporated municipalities. In terms of the built environment, however, the East Side looked exactly like suburbia anywhere. The car was king, residential sidewalks were rare, strip shopping plazas lined the main streets. By the 1990s storefronts sometimes went vacant and Eastland Mall struggled in the face of massive modernization at competing Southpark Mall. Small houses and older duplexes sometimes struggled to find tenants, reflecting the rising aspirations of Charlotte citizens. Yet even with the arrival of upwardly mobile African Americans since the 1970s, the East Side remained solidly middle-class and desirable, exactly the sort of *Leave It to Beaver* / *Brady Bunch* suburbia celebrated on TV sitcoms.

## Foreign immigrants arrive

José Hernández-Paris still vividly remembers when he saw Charlotte's first Mexican restaurant run by actual Mexicans. Jose's parents had emigrated in the 1970s from Colombia, South America, rare foreigners in this overwhelmingly native-born town. Driving down South Boulevard one day in the 1980s, the family glimpsed a sign for an eatery called El Cancun about to open in a disused fast-food building. Mexicans were at work upfitting the interior. Excited to see fellow Spanish-speakers, the Hernández-Paris clan stopped the car and pitched in.

Unbeknownst to José and his family, the U.S. was poised on the brink of a massive new immigration. Scholars are still unraveling the causes. Changes in immigrant laws beginning in 1965 ended the 1920s quotas that had favored northern Europeans. Newcomers first spilled into traditional gateways such as New York, Florida, Texas and California. Further legal developments during the 1990s at the state level made those states less welcoming. A new national law aimed at curtailing border crossings unexpectedly pushed migrants who were already in the U.S. to find more permanent jobs. Together all the various developments spurred a flow of immigrants into states where foreign-born had once been rare. Wrote the Brookings Institution in a study entitled *The Rise of New Immigrant Gateways*:

---

U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population and Housing: 1980 Block Statistics PHC80 1-116, Charlotte-Gastonia, N.C. SMSA (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981), pp. 30-76; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population and Housing: 1990 Block Group Statistics, Charlotte-Gastonia, N.C.; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population and Housing: 2000 Block Group Statistics, Charlotte-Gastonia, N.C. See also Elise C. Richards, "Residential Segregation in Charlotte, NC: Federal Policies, Urban Renewal and the Role of the North Carolina Fund" (Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy, Duke University, 2002), p. 29.

The U.S. foreign-born population grew 57.4 percent in the 1990s; by 2000 nearly one-third of U.S. immigrants resided outside established settlement states. Thirteen states primarily in the West and Southeast—including many that had not previously been major destinations for immigrants—saw foreign-born growth rates more than double the national average.<sup>11</sup>

North Carolina emerged as one of the top states, with Charlotte particularly affected. Banks in the city led the national trend toward interstate banking starting in the 1980s, making Charlotte the country's second biggest bank center by 2000 behind only New York City. Economic euphoria sparked employment opportunities at every level from highly paid office work to entry level service positions landscaping lawns, washing dishes and building new houses. Arrivals flooded in, both from across the U.S and around the globe. Brookings Institution ranked Charlotte as the fourth-fastest growing Latino metro in the U.S. during the 1990s, one of four "Hispanic hypergrowth cities" alongside Atlanta, Georgia, and Raleigh and Greensboro, North Carolina. By 2005, Brookings observed, Charlotte moved up to second-fastest. Mexicans were most visible, but Hispanics arrived from every Central American and South American country. Vietnamese also came in large numbers, along with other Asians from India and Pakistan, Korea and Cambodia. Still more newcomers arrived from eastern Europe, north and west Africa and the Middle East. In 1990 people born outside the U.S. made up barely one percent of Charlotte population. By 2010 the number zoomed above thirteen percent.

Charlotte's new foreign-born headed straight for the suburbs. A century earlier, inner city tenement districts of tight-packed old apartments has been synonymous with immigrant life, places such as the Lower East Side of New York. Charlotte had no such areas. Back when tenements rose in major cities, Charlotte had been little more than a village of 20,000 souls. Immigrants arriving in the 1990s looked around Charlotte for neighborhoods with good, but not expensive, rental housing. For many people that meant the East Side, those worn-in, but still attractive, post-World War II suburban apartment complexes and small houses along Central Avenue.

### **Central Avenue at Rosehaven – the salad bowl up close**

Slide into a blue vinyl booth at El Pulgarcito de Americas on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon and the joint is jumping. Burly construction foremen in *tejano* cowboy hats, their big pick-up trucks parked outside, hunch over plates of steak, refried beans, plantains and lettuce. Families ring tables, parents, young children, and maybe an *abuela* – grandmother. TVs hung in the corners show Mexican *telenovellas* with on-screen sub-titles in Spanish, necessary because someone is happily playing *banda sinaloa* pop hits, tuba-driven polkas, loudly on the jukebox.

Back in 1981 when I first arrived in Charlotte, myself a young newcomer settling into a worn-in duplex off Central Avenue, this spot was drab middle-American retail. The Rainbo Bakery Thrift Outlet sold day-old bread out of this shop. Next door a strip of tiny storefronts included Frame It Yourself, Modeler's Hobby Shop, Hairport Wigs, Fancy Pup Dog Grooming. On the other side were Party Palace Novelties and Sugar Shack Deli.<sup>12</sup> The plain, boxy one-story buildings constructed in the 1960s and 1970s looked out on an unadorned asphalt parking lot. Behind the shopping strip stood some late 1950s duplexes, looking like regular suburban

---

<sup>11</sup> Audrey Singer, *The Rise of New Immigrant Gateways* (Brookings Institution, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *1981 Charlotte (Mecklenburg County, NC) Directory Vol. 1* (Richmond, Virginia: Hill Directory Company, 1981), street directory section, p. 61.

ranch houses til you saw the two front doors and two street numbers, then block of single-family split-levels. Across Central Avenue was Glen Hollow Apartments, a huddle of yellow-brick two-story garden apartments developed in the late 1960s or 1970s. All of that unremarkable built environment is still there today, but filled with an entirely different mix of people.

I'm sitting with Henry Chirinos, asking how he came to start this bustling restaurant.<sup>13</sup> "I come to the U.S. in 1990, following my brother, who knew a job for me at a country club on Long Island," he recalls. "I was dishwasher, bus-boy. I tell the guy, 'I want to be cook.' I learn to cook American food, Italian, Greek, Jewish, anything. That's my school here." After ten years of cooking, Chirinos' wife suggested they visit Charlotte, where some of her family already lived. "I see it growing. I see no Salvadoran restaurant." The old Rainbo Bread store, which had been upfitted for a restaurant that had failed, was available to rent.

Chirinos modestly called his new spot El Pulgarcito, the little flea, in honor of the little countries he and his wife came from: Honduras and adjacent El Salvador. Most of Charlotte's Spanish speakers were Mexican, however, and any American customers would also be expecting Mexican tacos rather than unfamiliar Salvadoran *papas*, the thick corn pancakes stuffed with minced pork or beans and cheese. So if you open El Pulgarcito's menu today you may choose from a page of *Platos Tipicos Mexicano* as well as a page of *Platos Tipicos Hondurenan* and a page of *Platos Tipicos Salvadoran*.

It takes me a while, but I gradually realize that the menu reflects what is going on among Spanish speakers in the United States. People who have grown up in separate countries with separate cultures are now coming together to form a new "Latino" community. Flavors are coming together, too – not melting into an indistinguishable new thing, but rather retaining their individual savor. Or, I should say, *sabor*.

Where did Chirinos live while he built his business? A garden apartment complex. Not right here on Central Avenue, but not far away in a slightly newer area near the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. As soon as he could afford it, he moved further out and bought a house of his own. Today Chirinos, his wife and two daughters ages nine and seventeen reside just east of Charlotte in the suburban town of Harrisburg – an outward journey exactly like those that earlier generations of East Side residents took as they moved from the rental housing around Louise Mill out to the single family houses in the then-new Central Avenue subdivisions.

So if he did not live right here, why did he choose Central Avenue for his restaurant? "Central is a good business road," he says, lots of cars, lots of potential customers. Spanish speakers are thick on the ground, renting in the many of the duplexes and apartment communities. Charlotte's Latin American Coalition, the highly regarded non-profit agency that helps newcomers get acclimated, recently moved its headquarters into this block. On weekends in harvest season fruit sellers set up impromptu stands where they can find bits of shade and *paleta* vendors wheel past pushing carts filled with cool Mexican fruit popsicles.

If we stop there, it would be easy to label Central Avenue the *barrio*, the Latino district, but a short stroll around the parking lot that Henry Chirinos shares shows a much different reality. Next door to the east is Cedarland grocery and deli serving shoppers from the Middle East. Just beyond that you'll find a Mexican tienda (general store) called La Luna, and then Pho an Hoa, a Vietnamese soup parlor. Going in the other direction there is a Vietnamese grocery, Queen of Sheba Ethiopian nightclub, a competitor of Chirinos' called Pan Salvadoreno, and the newest addition, Jamile's International Cuisine, where two African refugee women cook *sugar*

---

<sup>13</sup> Author's interview with Henry Chirinos, March 13, 2012.



stew and *canjera* griddle-bread from their native Somalia. All of these food traditions share this single parking lot, within a space no longer that a baseball outfielder's long throw to home plate.



Each place functions as a cultural center for its ethnic group. Unlike the old-line Chinatown or Little Italy, there is not much food tourism on Central Avenue. When I go into these spots, I see few people who look like me, a white native-born American. Instead, these are places where physically dispersed people find each other and build community. At Jamiles' for instance, Hamsa Hashi and Jamile Sheikh seem to be always busy even when there are no customers in the dining room. "Oh, we are cooking for the Africans who cannot come here, who work at the airport and in factories," said Hamsa when I asked.<sup>14</sup> Indeed there is often a taxi cab outside, a Somali driver taking a meal break himself, then heading away with take-out for others.

---

<sup>14</sup> Author interview with Hamsa Hashi and Jamile Sheikh, June 12, 2010. See also Hanchett, "Somali Food, History's in the Side Dishes," at <http://www.historysouth.org/foodfromhome.html>



“[C]ommunity without propinquity is the overall trend among all new immigrants,” writes cultural geographer Elizabeth Chacko in a careful study of Ethiopians in suburban Washington DC. “In a setting characterized by residential scattering, Ethiopians stay connected and flourish as a society through activities that bring them to centralized places.”<sup>15</sup> First of those are usually restaurants, grocery stores and faith centers. In Charlotte, Hamsa and Jamile worship at the new Islamic Center mosque three blocks from their restaurant, its prayer minaret sprouting from what was once a suburban ranch house. The last time I visited their restaurant, construction was going on next door. “We are making a grocery,” said Jamile’s husband with shy pride, “for our Somali community.”

---

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Chacko, “Ethiopian Ethos and the Creation of Ethiopian Places in Suburban Washington, DC,” *Journal of Cultural Geography*, Spring/Summer 2003, pp. 21-42.

Will cultural interchange increase over time? It is already taking place in some respects, though it is hard for an outsider to see. At the Cedarland deli everyone looks “Middle Eastern” to me. But ask the men behind the cash register where they are from and they say Lebanon, Egypt and Morocco – ethnically distinct countries separated by thousands of miles. The same process that is melding traditions to forge a “Latino” identity also seems to be happening here. And merchants from the different cultures are collaborating behind the scenes. “Out of lemons, need some kind of equipment, we can go next door, glad to help,” says Chirinos of his neighbors. Will physical intermingling eventually lead to new food hybrids, maybe a *papusa* stuffed not with chopped pork but with savory chicken *sugar*? I’d love to stick around and find out.

An effort is afoot to bridge the East Side’s many cultures and forge links with the native-born white and black Americans who – despite all the ethnic storefronts – remain the majority of residents. Nancy Plummer, born on Central Avenue eighty years ago, and Nini Battista, a Filipino newcomer, came together to create Taste of the World in 2008. They wanted to call attention to their district’s vitality despite the shadow of empty Eastland Mall, closed since 2005; indeed it is rare to see more than one or two vacant stores over the four miles of Central Avenue. Once a year Plummer, Battista and a team of volunteers organize a fleet of minibuses to take visitors on East Side eating tours. In partnership with Charlotte’s city-wide Crossroads Project, which aims to integrate immigrants and long-time residents, Taste of the World publishes a handsome guide to more than twenty East Side eateries and the families who operate them, available both as a booklet and on-line.<sup>16</sup>

### **A new urban geography**

The salad bowl suburb phenomenon extends far beyond Central Avenue. On Saturdays and Sundays -- the two busiest days for most immigrant businesses -- I’ve taken to searching for “four continent shopping centers,” spots where you can park once and walk to food establishments from at least four completely different geographies.<sup>17</sup> Five miles east from Central Avenue, out in suburban Matthews, there’s a 1970s strip plaza with a Ukrainian deli (Europe), a Mexican bakery and also an old-line Southern restaurant (North America), a South African butcher (Africa) and a Korean/Japanese grocery (Asia). At least three other similarly diverse clusters exist at different compass points around the metropolitan area. In each case, there is a busy street, underused shopping plazas, and nearby housing that is not expensive but at the same time not run-down.

Salad bowls suburbs exist in other Southern cities. In Atlanta, for example, Buford Highway has gained fame for its miles-long *mélange* of strip malls inhabited by entrepreneurs of every ethnicity.<sup>18</sup> Southern Foodways Alliance published a history of the street that pointed out how good, inexpensive housing came available as a huge General Motors assembly plant shut down. SFA asked one of the area’s Korean pioneers, Harold Shin, how he decided to open his vast Buford Highway Farmers Market, a mega supermarket with departments targeting Latino,

---

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.charlotteeast.com/totw/>

<sup>17</sup> On Charlotte’s widely scattered ethnic eateries see for instance Hanchett, “World of Flavor: Be a Food Tourist in Charlotte,” *Charlotte Observer*, September 13, 2011 and the “Food from Home” *Charlotte Observer* column series collected at <http://www.historysouth.org/foodfromhome.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Torre Olson, “A Short History of Buford Highway,” *City Guide Atlanta / Buford Highway* (Southern Foodways Alliance, 2010).



Korean, Russian and other immigrants. “Heavy, heavy traffic,” he said simply, “warehousing, manufacturing, everything ... [B]usiness, you know, that dynamic, people just doing business.”<sup>19</sup>

It is tempting, given the high visibility of particular streets such as Buford Highway or Central Avenue, to assume that what is coming into being are “international corridors.” But actually immigrants are going wherever housing fits their price range. Spanish speakers live at every point of the compass in metro Atlanta, according to a geographer’s survey of spots for hiring Latino day laborers.<sup>20</sup> Likewise with Muslims: Zabihah.com, an online resource that bills itself as “the world’s largest guide to Halal restaurants and products” shows mosques in all sections of the city.<sup>21</sup> Out on Buford Highway, Harold Shinn agrees:

“[O]lder cities, you know Chicago, New York, maybe even LA, there’s the distinct—this is the Korea Town. This is Chinatown. This is the Polish area. This is East LA.

[Y]ou really don’t have that here. You have areas of concentration of businesses but you kind of—it’s almost like somebody took a handful of your ethnic groups and just did a little shake and just [laughs] threw it down and scattered it all over the place.”<sup>22</sup>

Having begun this essay looking at food around a single suburban intersection, we can now see the outlines of a something much larger. Foodways help us discern a social landscape in which what you can afford – rather than your ethnicity – defines where you can live. That’s remarkable in the American South, known for so long as a hotbed of racial segregation. If you had predicted fifty years ago that Dixie would become an immigrant destination, few would have listened to you. That those newcomers might live intermingled in the land once marked by White and Colored water fountains – such a vision would have met total disbelief.

The South’s historic racial patterns and previous paucity of immigrants make the salad bowl phenomenon stand out here, but I am starting to suspect that the pattern is nation-wide.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Harold Shinn, Buford Highway Farmers Market (SFA Oral History, 2010) [http://southernfoodways.org/documentary/oh/buford\\_hwy/harold\\_shinn.shtml](http://southernfoodways.org/documentary/oh/buford_hwy/harold_shinn.shtml)

<sup>20</sup> Terry Easton, “Geographies of Hope and Despair: Atlanta’s African American, Latino, and White Day Laborers,” published in the on-line journal [SouthernSpaces.org](http://www.southernspaces.org), December 2007. See also <http://www.atlantaregional.com/about-us/public-involvement/global-atlanta-works/global-atlanta-snapshots>

<sup>21</sup> Zabihah is just one of several food resource guides on the web that can be used to explore and map cultural geography across many cities. See also “Japanese Grocery Stores in the United States and Territories” at <http://www.justhungry.com/handbook/just-hungry-handbooks/japanese-grocery-store-list> and <http://xuvn.com/foodofvietnam/grocer%20search.htm>. There is a good chance that finding a specialty store for any one of these ethnicities will point you to a cluster of stores of many ethnicities.

<sup>22</sup> Harold Shinn, Buford Highway Farmers Market (SFA Oral History, 2010) [http://southernfoodways.org/documentary/oh/buford\\_hwy/harold\\_shinn.shtml](http://southernfoodways.org/documentary/oh/buford_hwy/harold_shinn.shtml)

<sup>23</sup> A variety of scholars are describing ethnic suburbanization, using a variety of names. Wei Li points to concentrations of Chinese in certain California suburbs, which she calls ethnoburbs: “Ethnoburb Versus Chinatown: Two Types of Urban Ethnic Communities in Los Angeles,” *Cybergeo*. Vol 10. (1998) p. 1-12, also Wei Li, *Ethnoburb: The New Ethnic Community in Suburban America* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009). Wilbur Zelinsky discusses a pattern he calls heterolocalism in *The Enigma of Ethnicity: Another American Dilemma* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), pp. 124 - 154.

“Immigrants Make Paths to Suburbia, Not Cities,” headlined the *New York Times* in a report on 2010 Census findings.<sup>24</sup> Racial and ethnic segregation seem to be on the decline, observes Brookings Institution demographer William Frey. “Nationally we are moving toward greater integration.”<sup>25</sup> His analysis shows that racial separation declined in 61 of the top 100 U.S. metro areas during the decade 2000 - 2010. Immigrants now are just as likely to locate in suburbia as elsewhere, Frey and other Brookings researchers report, producing “a dappled map in which foreign born and native born, poor and non-poor, are scattered and intermingled across the entire metropolitan landscape.”

In Columbus, Ohio, professor David Walker at Ohio Wesleyan University is working with geography students to explore how Somali, Latino and other immigrants are bringing new life to the failing Northland Mall area.<sup>26</sup> In Boise, Idaho, “there are more ethnic food markets than meet the eye around town,” reports James Patrick Kelly in the *Idaho Statesman*. “Many of them are tucked away in strip malls and off-the-beaten-path neighborhoods throughout the Valley.”<sup>27</sup> Anchorage, Alaska, experiencing a “dizzying” influx of new immigrants, is no melting pot, marvels the Anchorage Daily News. “Instead it’s a mosaic” where “immigrant owned businesses stud strip malls.”<sup>28</sup>

Recently Southern Foodways Alliance founder John T. Edge and I parachuted into Indianapolis to see if the pattern played out there.<sup>29</sup> Along Lafayette Road in the northwest suburbs we first hit payday. Same unexciting strip plazas, same worn-in apartment complexes as along Central Avenue. Even a failing mall, here called Lafayette Square, and empty big-box stores. “What people do not see right away is that new small businesses are moving in to fill those vacancies,” says Mary Clark of the Lafayette Square Coalition. “You can eat your way around the world here. And you can learn about others while doing it.”<sup>30</sup>

Just as in Charlotte and Atlanta, Lafayette Road is beginning to be known as an international corridor, but the salad bowl effect is elsewhere throughout the metro area. Immigrants have brought Russian groceries to the north side, halal Pakistani pizza to the west side, Burmese breakfast specialties to the far south suburbs. And like in Latino Charlotte, foods are beginning to intermingle. At Havana Café, proprietor Flora Shutt sells Cuban favorites that her American customers expect, along with *papusas* from her own native El Salvador plus soup from Honduras. “El Salvador is my home but here we have the food of many places,” she told us. “Reinforcement for Ms. Shutt’s point came by way of her own lunch,” John T. observed, “a Hawaiian-style pineapple and ham pizza from a nearby Dominos.”<sup>31</sup>

People who expect old-style ethnic enclaves often fail to grasp the new vitality. A Chinatown, that’s what Indianapolis needs, Mayor Greg Ballard proposed in 2008. “I’d like Indianapolis to be looked on as a welcoming, international city. You go around the world – San

---

William Frey falls back on the old melting pot metaphor: “Melting Pot Suburbs,” in Bruce Katz and Robert Lang, eds., *Redefining Urban and Suburban America: Evidence from Census 2000* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Sabrina Tavenise and Robert Gebeloff, “Immigrants Make Paths to Suburbia, Not Cities,” *New York Times*, December 14, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Tavenise and Gebeloff, “Immigrants Make Paths.”

<sup>26</sup> Carrie Ghose, “Ethnic Businesses Ending Vacancies,” *Business First of Columbus*, August 20, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> James Patrick Kelly, “Ethnic Markets, Treasure Valley Locations,” *Idaho Statesman*, August 28, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> “New Faces, New City,” *Anchorage Daily News*, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> John T. Edge, “In Indianapolis, the World Comes to Eat,” *New York Times*, February 22, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Edge, “In Indianapolis.”

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Edge, “In Indianapolis.”

Francisco or London – and Chinatowns are some of the best places.”<sup>32</sup> The 2010 Census shows that it already is welcoming and international. Immigration to the Indianapolis metro zoomed 124% between 2000 and 2010, topping 114,000 people.<sup>33</sup>

Instead pining for a Chinatown, Drew Appleby built a website. IndyEthnicFood.com maps cuisines and introduces the faces behind the flavors. Like Taste of the World in Charlotte it aims to connect adventurous eaters with ethnic entrepreneurs. And as in Charlotte, there’s a bigger mission. Appleby and his team of volunteer explorer/writers want to “educate Indianapolis about diversity through food.”<sup>34</sup>

Indeed that is the value of studying foodways. By looking at who is eating what, where, and why, we get to know our neighbors and see our community and ourselves more clearly.



Mural at Tacos El Nevados on Central Avenue by Mexican immigrant artist Rosalia Torres-Weiner, 2016. Butterflies, symbolizing immigrants’ freedom of movement, flutter in front of a skyline of the Charlotte, the Queen City. At center (wearing a queen’s crown) is the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Edge, “In Indianapolis.”

<sup>33</sup> Jill H. Wilson and Audrey Singer, *Immigrants in 2010: Metropolitan America, A Decade of Change* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Edge, “In Indianapolis.”