

Exchanging Recipes, Exchanging Culture
Ashley Bryant

“There’s 15 minutes of class left today – what would you like to do?” I ask the two Somali women sitting across the table from me.

We just met today. A 24-year-old mother I’ll call Hibo is anxious to be hired at Walmart in order to provide for her family. The other, much older woman I’ll call Shamsó smiles warmly at me, yet she cannot disguise the confusion evident in her eyes – she does not understand a word I just said. Both women have been learning English for less than a year and their levels of proficiency vary drastically. My co-teacher, Annabel, and I struggle to think of an activity that satisfies their diverse tutoring needs.

My stomach grumbles. I regret not eating more for breakfast. Then it hits me.

“Let’s talk about food,” I say.

A unique expression of bewilderment and delight springs upon my students’ faces. The word is one with which they are familiar.

“Explain how to make your favorite dish to the class. I’ll go first.”

I begin to describe the steps in making pizza. I pretend to roll out the dough, adding pesto, chicken, sautéed vegetables, and cheese before placing it in the oven.

Annabel describes her grandmother’s homemade New England clam chowder, with hearty chunks of seafood and potatoes in a creamy broth.

We then break for a quick geography lesson, drawing rough maps of the Northeast and the Horn of Africa on the faded green chalkboard.

Annabel points to Somalia. “What Somali dishes do you like to make for your families here in Lewiston?” she asks.

Shamsó slowly describes her favorite recipe of combining rice, vegetables, spices, and meat – we give it the title of “Everything Soup.” She struggles frequently, yet the previous confusion in her eyes is gone and is replaced with poise and passion. Shamsó chops up onions, potatoes, peppers, and carrots on the table and throws them into the invisible pot. She carefully cuts up lamb into small pieces and adds curry from her spice cabinet across the room. Hibo chimes in, describing her take on Shamsó’s dish, adding different meat and vegetables.

We all sit around our happy dinner table, eating our dishes and laughing. We sample each others’ meals and give words of praise for our culinary concoctions.

I glance back at the clock. We’ve gone 10 minutes over. I dismiss our dinner. Hibo and Shamsó say, “Thank you, teacher,” as they exit the classroom. Annabel and I smile at each other – we just saw something magical happen.

In a small room huddled around a worn table in the Adult Learning Center, we had a cross-cultural feast. We began the activity by sharing recipes but ended up sharing culture. Our meal represented the dynamic city of Lewiston, a place of American-style

pizza and New England delicacies mixed with new dishes from the Horn of Africa. Food is universal and it brought two cultures together.

Ashley Bryant is a 2016 graduate of Bates College. An anthropology major and education minor, she spent a majority of her Bates career working in local Lewiston classrooms and afterschool programs. Bryant plans to stay in Maine and work in the public school system this fall before beginning her Fulbright in Brazil next year.

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