

# Ethnic Goes Exurban

## Washington's Sprawl, as Told through Its Migrating Restaurants

TYLER COWEN

Little more than a decade ago, the quest for a *dosa* meant going to the District. That staple of south Indian cooking, the masala dosa (fry a moist mix of ground lentils and rice into a long, waferlike form, and stick something like potatoes inside), was a rare commodity in the Washington area.

Today, dozens of local restaurants serve dosas. The Indian restaurant Minerva, located in Fairfax, has 11 different dosas on its menu, stuffed with chutneys, spinach, onions, chicken and lamb in addition to potatoes. In much of outside-the-Beltway Virginia, where I do most of my eating these days, it's easier to find a good dosa than a decent hamburger.

If we are what we eat, this simple parable of the dosa reflects how rapidly our region has changed. Ethnic eating has gone exurban, tracking the march of immigration and the growth of small businesses from inner city to inner suburb and finally to exurbs that were virtually all-white rural outposts with cornfields just a decade ago; it has moved from Northwest D.C. to redefine dining throughout the sprawling Washington region.

I know, because since I came here 26 years ago to study at George Mason University, I've been eating my way all over Washington. I started in the Latin and Ethiopian dives of Adams Morgan in the 1980s. In the '90s, I circled the Beltway to find the Indian and Chinese restaurants that newcomers were opening in Rockville and Silver Spring. Today, I'm most likely to travel out to malls in Chantilly, Centreville and Herndon for the most authentic Middle Eastern, Chinese, Indian and Korean food. An economist by day and a diner by night, I've gradually gained knowledge of exurbia while becoming an expert on ethnic food.

One commonly held belief is that Washington area dining has been driven by refugees from political crises around the world. Back in the '80s there was some truth to this theory, when the new urban chic involved sharing a platter of lamb tibbs around a basket-woven table in Adams Morgan's Ethiopian enclave. But we see no swarm of Iraqi restaurants today (there was one in Herndon—Zuhair's—but it closed after about a year in business); nor has civil war in Somalia brought platters of *muffo* patties to D.C. tables. Indeed, the cuisines with the most potent recent growth in our area—Indian and Chinese—have come from countries with their own booms over the past 15 years.

The emergence of ethnic restaurants depends not on refugees from global trouble spots, but on several shifting social and economic factors: a concentration of people from the ethnic community, space at low rents, and a cuisine with potential to appeal to mainstream America. Where those forces are present, expect a culinary explosion; where they are not, ethnic restaurants will retreat.

Those are the factors that have shaped this region. Between 1960 and 2006, the District's population dropped from close to 800,000 to just 550,000, about 20 percent of whom live below the poverty line. High taxes, bad schools and expensive housing impelled people to leave for the suburbs, taking their businesses with them. Immigrants also began following the new opportunities—settling outside the city. During the same period, Tysons Corner went from a cow patch to a bunch of auto dealerships to a first-tier shopping and business center. Small wonder that would-be restaurateurs such as Nat Kittayapifon, the manager at Pilin, chose Tysons over the District. "We were the first Thai restaurant in Fairfax County 17 years ago," he remembers. "Now I can count 10 on my fingers with no problem."

Of course, the District, with its lobbyists and international organizations, continues to be a center for expense-account dining. But the good ethnic restaurants downtown are either trendy (think Rasika and Indique, both of which reinterpret Indian for upmarket American eaters), or cater to the wealthy international crowd (such as the Spanish Taberna del Alabardero near the International Monetary Fund and World Bank). For the best buys, though, you have to get in the car and head out to the sprawl. These days, the most authentic, spiciest food comes at cheap, ugly strip malls, far from the District and miles from the Metro.

Adams Morgan once served as a classic parvenu dining spot, but its signature Ethiopian restaurants are no longer fresh. Old staples such as Meskerem now attract more Americans than Ethiopians. More vital mom-and-pop Ethiopian places—the ones that serve *kitfo*, raw beef sprinkled with chili peppers and a form of dry cottage cheese—opened first on U Street and then moved down to Ninth Street just south of U.

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Georgetown and Dupont Circle priced out most of their good ethnic food more than a decade ago. Even Chinatown is at risk from the forces of gentrification. It's merging with the now-fashionable Verizon Center neighborhood, which is fast crossing over to trendy fusion and mainstream chains. Zaytinya (Middle Eastern fusion), Zengo (Latin-Asian fusion) and IndeBleu (a mix of French and Indian flavors) are among the best restaurants in the District, but all are known for their bars as much as for their menus.

Outside the District, much the same pattern has reshaped close-in urban centers such as Old Town Alexandria. In the late '80s, Old Town used to lure me with its Afghan *pilau*s and *chalows*, its Asian fusion and its chili at the Hard Times Cafe (my favorite stop on the way to Bullets games in Landover). But Afghan places have now spread farther west, edgier Asian dining has moved to Maryland, and Hard Times has become a chain and softened its chili's bite to appeal to the Old Town tourist trade.

I now travel to much grittier West Alexandria, especially near Interstate 395, which boasts a culinary range from Pakistani to Thai to Szechuan. Cheap rents, easy parking and highway proximity have made possible places there like the Thai Hut on Van Dorn Street, where I go now to find my favorite *mee krob*.

A similar shift has taken place in Maryland, where Rockville's strip malls provide better options than upscale and closer-in Bethesda. College Park and Gaithersburg—both fairly distant and shabbier—are its closest rivals for their array of Caribbean, Indian and Latino offerings. But Maryland lags behind Virginia as a host state for new ethnic restaurants. The 2005 Small Business Survival Index, which ranks states according to such measures as income tax rates and health-care regulations, shows why: Virginia stands in 13th place among the 50 states—making it a more hospitable setting for starting up a small business than Maryland, which comes in 25th.

Within Virginia, ethnic food has been on the move, heading westward toward lower rents and new population centers. As Victor Serrano of Victor's Grill, a Falls Church restaurant serving Latino meats, put it, "We have our restaurants out in the suburbs because the Bolivian and Argentine communities are spread out throughout Arlington, Falls Church, Vienna and Annandale. Our strategy is to make ourselves convenient."

And convenience for ethnic restaurant owners these days often means proximity to suburban places of work. "We wanted to be close to the offices here," says Rani Varma, the owner of Bombay Tandoor in Tysons Corner. "We get a flood of people at lunchtime."

Falls Church has held on to the reputation it established in the 1990s for Asian and especially Vietnamese food. Indeed, the Eden Center on Wilson Boulevard—the bustling economic reflection of a county where one in every four residents is now foreign-born—attracts Asian visitors from the entire East Coast. I used to go to this huge mall whenever I wanted; now I worry about whether I can find a parking space.

In the 1980s and early '90s, I could still find excellent ethnic food—particularly Vietnamese—in Arlington and Clarendon, but more recently, I've watched well-established suburban

eateries march toward the exurbs. Take Madhu Ban, the excellent Indian vegetarian restaurant that used to be in Clarendon: As the area gentrified, rents rose, and the owner, Munshi Ram, moved out. He reopened his restaurant as Punjab Dhaba in Loehmann's Plaza in Falls Church, closer to the Dulles corridor and the high-tech boom that helped double the Indian population in the Washington region from fewer than 40,000 in 1990 to some 78,000 in 2000. A *dhaba* is typically a roadside cafe, and this one is right next to the Bollywood movie theater. I can tell when the Indian movies start and end by watching the flow of crowds at the restaurant.

**E**thnic food continues to shift farther west. Later this September, Rangoli will open as the first Indian restaurant in South Riding in the Market Square strip mall, just off Route 50 in Loudoun County. As recently as 2000, there were fewer than 10,000 Asian residents in Loudoun; by 2005, that number had more than tripled to 28,813. Many of these new residents come from Fairfax and Arlington counties in search of cheaper housing and are eager to bring their favorite foods along.

The strip mall that will house Rangoli already has a Subway and Firkin & Hound—a chain selling "pub food"—and is about to get a place called Thai Chili, too. This mall symbolizes the new look of contemporary ethnic dining—indistinguishable from the surrounding exurban area.

These malls have become more accessible for immigrants as they have gained wealth—and cars. John Chia, the owner of Kam Po, says he chose Leesburg Pike near Baileys Crossroads for his Chinese-Peruvian eatery because it is convenient for the region's estimated 75,000 Peruvian transplants as well as other Latinos. "Old ethnic neighborhoods, all your restaurants were walking distance," he says. "Now 99 percent of my customers come in cars." (Kam Po is what in Lima would be called a *chifa*, run by Chinese immigrants to Peru who moved to the D.C. suburbs, bringing their own brand of fusion food with them.)

This new mobility is weakening the whole notion of the ethnic neighborhood. Forget the old Chinatown paradigm: Diffusion is the new model. As a result, ethnic restaurants are more like scattered outposts, drawing from a wide radius. As Serrano points out, "Our competition is not right next door. We compete with . . . restaurants five or 10 miles away."

My eating odyssey has uncovered other surprises and undermined old assumptions. Who would have guessed, for example, that good Peruvian and Bolivian restaurants outnumber Mexican ones in a region that is home to more than 32,000 Latino-owned businesses and where one in 11 residents is Latino? Or that a variety of Mexican *tacquerias*, soup joints and bakeries are centered in the no-man's land of Bladensburg, on and near Kenilworth Avenue? The surrounding community is largely Hispanic, and it is only a matter of time before Mexican entrepreneurs spread this food to Northern Virginia.

Of course, the march of immigration is a more complex story than that told by the restaurants I find. Filipinos, for example, are the second most numerous Asian group in the

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United States (some 2 million, compared with 2.7 million Chinese). But outside of Little Manila in Los Angeles and parts of San Francisco, Filipino restaurants are unusual. The Washington area—where there are some 34,000 people of Filipino heritage—has Little Quiapo in Arlington and Manila Cafe in Springfield. But few non-Filipino Americans have a love for fish sauce, vinegar marinade and oxtail. And, as my Filipino friend John Nye has told me, many Filipinos prefer a home-cooked meal.

Korean food also remains largely the province of Korean patrons. Most Westerners don't go beyond *bul gogi* (broiled beef) or perhaps *bibim bap* (rice bowl with egg and vegetables). The cuisine tastes harsh to the uninitiated, with its abundant garlic and unusual seafood delicacies. This also explains why Korean restaurants remain so tightly clustered near Korean communities (most of the best are in Annandale) and why just about every Korean restaurant is good. Unlike Chinese

restaurants, there is little danger of Koreans taking the Americanized beef-with-broccoli route.

Not that beef-with-broccoli is always a recipe for success. In fact, exurban ethnic food typically packs a punch. Bennie Cardozo of Minerva remembers the perils of trying to adapt: "For the first several months, we tried to cook to American tastes. We nearly went out of business. Then we switched to spicy and traditional to target local Indians, and all of a sudden lines were out the door."

Louis Armstrong once said "All music is folk music." Similarly, all cuisine is ethnic cuisine. My quarter-century sampling of dosas and other delicacies has become a case study in the demographics of our rapidly changing area.

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