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Food as a social weapon: Peruvian immigrant entrepreneurs claiming home, belonging, and distinction in Southern California

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ABSTRACT

Peruvian immigrants in Southern California encounter a complex context of reception in which xenophobic portrayals of Latinxs exist alongside positive discourses on immigration. Simultaneously, the Peruvian gastronomic boom has reached the Golden State, where foodies' celebration of Peruvian cuisine creates a favourable opportunity structure for Peruvian immigrant entrepreneurs. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and life history interviews with 35 Peruvian women culinary entrepreneurs in and around Los Angeles, the article argues that these entrepreneurs capitalize on the positive food discourses surrounding Peruvian gastronomy to contest stigmas of an ascribed Latinx identity. Food becomes a powerful weapon to negotiate a position within racial/ethnic hierarchies. By showing that culinary businesses constitute a unique space where these complex processes play out, the paper expands the economic focus in the ethnic entrepreneurship literature and provides knowledge on how immigrants' economic agency is embedded in broader social processes, such as their search for home and belonging.

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Introduction¹

In the documentary *Perú sabe: la cocina, arma social*, the high-profile Peruvian restaurateur, Gastón Acurio, maintains that “In Peru, cuisine is a social weapon loaded with future” (Santos 2012, my translation). The narrative created in the wake of the so-called Peruvian gastronomic boom at the turn of the millennium echoes this belief in the power of food and how it

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can be employed to “heal the wounds inflicted by long histories of colonial violence, exclusion, and inequality” (Matta and García 2019, 2). Questioning the optimistic narrative of the boom, scholars have directed attention to its “dark side” (García 2013) and limited potential for inclusion and social change (Matta 2019).

While elite restaurateurs, like Acurio, capitalize on a privileged position within Peruvian racial/ethnic and class structures and embark on the conquest of foreign culinary markets, Peruvian migrants also promote Peruvian cuisine abroad, as culinary traditions travel along with dreams of a future and of creating a home for themselves and their families in their new societies. In this article, I examine the experiences of Peruvian immigrant women in Southern California who have established Peruvian food businesses. These women are riding the tide of the hype of Peruvian food and its global recognition. However, while the Peruvian gastronomic boom has captured the attention of North American foodies, creating a favourable opportunity structure for Peruvian culinary ventures, the discourse on social inclusion through food has met a different narrative in California, where xenophobic portrayals of Latinxs as undocumented, poor, and criminal – a threat to American society – exist alongside supportive discourses on immigration. While constructing boundaries between Latinx immigrants and the dominant white Anglo population, the “Latino threat” narrative (Chávez 2013) resonates with similar power structures that produce prevailing divisions in Peru between a whiter and wealthier Peruvian population in coastal urban areas, associated with modernity and progress, and an indigenous, rural, and marginalized population in the Andes and Amazon regions, imagined as backward and less “civilized.” Thus, Peruvians who migrate to the United States navigate a complex racial/ethnic landscape, which is further complicated by experiences of migration.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in and around Los Angeles and life-history interviews with 35 Peruvian women culinary entrepreneurs, this article asks: What role do food and culinary businesses play in the women’s struggles to make themselves at home and to make sense of themselves in this complex context of reception? Food, I argue, arises as a powerful social weapon the women draw upon to negotiate inclusion through distinction and a position for themselves and for Peruvian immigrant communities in the area. Culinary entrepreneurship enables these processes, as immigrants’ food businesses provide an important space for homemaking and claims of belonging.

The paper demonstrates that immigrant entrepreneurship serves as more than an alternative way to economic incorporation and upward mobility, often centred in the literature (Light 1972; Waldinger 1986; Portes and Rumbaut 1990). By emphasizing the relationship between immigrant business ownership and immigrant homemaking, the paper extends our understanding of how immigrants’ economic agency is embedded in

broader social processes, such as their search for home and belonging. Scholars of so-called ethnic entrepreneurship often rely on integration and assimilationist frameworks that limit the analysis of migrant settlement to a simple and dyadic minority-majority phenomenon, perpetuating social imaginaries of “who has the power and legitimacy to demand *integration* of others?” and reinforcing the gap “between an ‘us’ and a ‘them’” (Rytter 2019, 690–691, emphasis in original). I show that through culinary business ownership Peruvian immigrant women in Southern California negotiate inclusion, not only in their encounters with the white Anglo population – considered the mainstream majority – but also with other Peruvians and other minoritized populations often grouped together as Latinxs. Novel insights on home as a lens to understand immigrants’ everyday experiences with settling in a new place (Boccagni 2017; Boccagni and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2023; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Pastor 2021) guide my understanding of these complex processes. It also directs my attention to race, another neglected aspect in a field that has emphasized ethnicity (Gold 2016; Valdez 2011).

Peruvians and Latinxs in Southern California

The United States has been the primary destination for Peruvians (Busse-Cárdenas and Lovatón Dávila 2011), many of whom have settled in and around Los Angeles County (Noe-Bustamante, Flores, and Shah 2019). Still, the 110,053 residents of Peruvian origin in California constitute a miniscule number compared to the more than 12 million Mexican-origin residents in the state (United States Census Bureau 2020). In contrast to the Mexican and Central American population in Southern California, with its predominantly rural and indigenous roots in addition to lower socioeconomic status, the Peruvian immigrants in and around Los Angeles constitute a heterogeneous group in terms of race/ethnicity and class. Most originate from urban areas (Paerregaard 2008), and although Peruvians in the United States represent a socioeconomically and racially diverse group, they are demographically closer to non-Hispanic whites than to their Mexican and Central American counterparts, according to indicators such as median household income, poverty rates, and educational attainments (Bergad 2010).

Scholars have highlighted how Peruvian immigrants navigate racialized discourses from their country of origin in their everyday lives abroad (Berg 2015; Alcalde 2022). In Peru, influences from centuries of colonialism continue to inform social relations, as notions of indigeneity and whiteness structure racialization processes (De la Cadena 2000; Alcalde 2018). In the United States, legal immigration status intersects with race and class in shaping Peruvians’ experiences of racialization. This is often linked to an ascribed Latinx identity, as illegality is associated with racialized Latinxs (Hallett 2012). Although California has turned to more progressive policies toward

undocumented migrants (Nguyen and Serna 2014), Latinxs in California continue to face discrimination, as local, state, and federal policies and societal reception combine to shape undocumented Latinx migrants' experiences (Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018). Constituting until recently the majority of undocumented migrants in the United States (Passel and Cohn 2019), Mexicans have been perceived as the “quintessential ‘illegal aliens’” (Chávez 2013, 4). Peruvian immigrants, however, experience being conflated with Mexicans (Alcalde 2022), and the mark of illegality also affects Peruvians with authorized immigration statuses. Peruvian immigrants have established their businesses within this complex context of reception, which is further shaped by a positive narrative around Peruvian gastronomy.

Food, migration, and the Peruvian gastronomic boom

Sociologists, anthropologists, and historians have demonstrated how food activates processes of differentiation and othering, pointing to how culinary cultures contribute to defining the ideals of a nation (Ferguson 2010) and to how food and gastronomy reproduce boundaries between ethnic groups (Gabaccia 2000), social classes (Bourdieu 2013), castes (Appadurai 1988) and genders (Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann 2010). In Peru, however, food has been portrayed as a source of inclusion due to the gastronomic boom that emerged in the 1990s. Leaving behind its image of poverty and being a dangerous place to visit, particularly prompted by a violent internal conflict in the 1980s and 1990s, Peru turned the page to the new millennium during a long period of sustained economic growth (Matta 2016). Tourism boomed, as Machu Picchu was declared one of the Seven Wonders of the World, but also because Peru was positioned among the world's leading culinary nations (World Travel Awards n.d.). Spearheaded by a group of chefs, the majority from wealthy families and with training from Europe, the boom placed food at the centre of a new national project. Acurio became the star spokesperson of the gastronomic boom, leading a “development-oriented discourse” through which he presented “a cosmopolitan vision” of the potential of a Peruvian cuisine that takes pride in traditions and native food resources as fundamental components of Peru's immense agro-biodiversity (Matta 2016, 345). Food entrepreneurs, investors, and government and private institutions joined forces to promote Peruvian gastronomy in Peru and abroad.

Scholars have highlighted the possibilities and challenges of this narrative. It promises social inclusion and recovery from the traumas of the past, as previously devalued Andean and Amazon foodways are recognized, and alliances between the city and the rural provinces, between indigenous farmers and white, upper – and middle-class urban chefs, are forged. Matta and García note that “the celebration of indigenous knowledge *as knowledge*

can be a powerful antidote to the racism and marginalization Native peoples in Peru continue to face” (Matta and García 2019, 8, emphasis in original). However, it does not automatically lead to social inclusion, and may rather obscure and reinforce historical inequities (Fan 2013; García 2013; Cuevas-Calderón 2016). Critics claim that the boom is mainly led by white male restaurateurs from the coastal cities (Alcalde 2018) and that the project of inclusion is much more politically demanding than what can be done from the realm of the kitchen (Matta 2019).

A recent body of research has begun to document how Peruvian migrants benefit from the boom. Studies from Santiago de Chile emphasize the juxtaposition between a stigmatized Peruvian stereotype and the positive reception of Peruvian cuisine (Stefoni 2002); the gendered and classed character of the Peruvian enclave (Stefoni 2008); and the way food narratives mediate recognition of Peruvian immigrants in a country where they are regarded as “poor, backwards, and indigenous” in comparison to the imaginary of a “white – allegedly European – modern and wealthy” Chilean society (Imilan 2015, 228). Similarly, drawing mainly on a survey among Peruvian migrants around the world and interviews with Peruvians in Germany, Alcalde (2018) claims that the narrative of the boom reinforces class privileges beyond national borders, as middle – and upper-class Peruvian immigrants strive to maintain their social status abroad. In a study of Peruvian supply chains in San Francisco, Brain (2014) demonstrates the interaction between the local and global scales of the commodity networks that Peruvian chefs and restaurateurs make use of, and how wealth, position, race, and gender condition access to these. With a few exceptions (Alcalde 2018, 2022), these studies reproduce a binary view of minority-majority relations in settlement processes and overlook the complex encounters in which immigrants engage.

Immigrant entrepreneurship through new lenses

Scholars have mainly viewed immigrant entrepreneurship as an alternative pathway to economic incorporation and upward mobility for immigrants who are marginalized in the mainstream labour market (Light 1972; Waldinger 1986; Portes and Rumbaut 1990). Although they have emphasized the social embeddedness of immigrant entrepreneurship, they have often limited their analysis to how co-ethnic social networks serve as a pool of resources that determine the survival and success of immigrant businesses. Thus, they ignore the broader non-economic dynamics of immigrant enterprise, such as spatial practices and community building (Wang 2013), as well as the fact that immigrant entrepreneurs are living people with bodies that need to be nursed with “materials and memories that matter affectively” (Ray 2016, 17). Immigrant entrepreneurs are depicted as *homo economicus* with individualist aims of assimilating into a mainstream American middle

class, rather than living subjects embedded in families, communities, and everyday life. Scholars have addressed the need to “shift the focal point from mobility outcomes [...] to intermediate social processes” (Zhou and Cho 2010). This paper aligns with a newer body of scholarship that addresses this gap in the literature (Wang 2013; Ray 2016; Estrada 2019; Rosales 2020; Miranda-Nieto and Boccagni 2020; Molina 2022).

Scholarship on immigrant businesses is further criticized for its monolithic and essentialist treatment of ethnicity and for ignoring how ethnicity intersects with other structures of domination, such as gender, race, and class (Valdez 2011). Recent studies (Gold 2016; Wingfield and Taylor 2016) reveal how Black American entrepreneurs are defined as a cultural or ethnic group, which overlooks the way racial inequality shapes Black minorities’ entrepreneurial opportunities. Similarly, research on Latinx entrepreneurs in the United States demonstrates how the conflation of race with ethnicity has obscured important aspects of Latinx immigrants’ experiences with business ownership (Valdez 2011; Vallejo and Canizales 2016).

I turn to novel insights on immigrant homemaking to demonstrate how Peruvian immigrants’ entrepreneurial experiences and practices are embedded within dynamics outside the marketplace, as well as how race, class, and legal immigration status intersect with ethnicity in shaping these processes. Although theories of immigrant integration and assimilation have yielded important knowledge, they have not been able to capture immigrant place-making and the meaning and effort immigrants invest into creating a new home in a new place (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2017). A recent body of scholarship is more attuned to immigrants’ everyday experiences and has adopted a subject-oriented view constructed around the quotidian concept of home (Boccagni 2017; Cancellieri 2017; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2017; Lauster and Zhao 2017; Boccagni and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2023; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Pastor 2021). Adopting a “home” lens allows me to perceive the broader role entrepreneurship and culinary business spaces play in the lives of Peruvian immigrants, as they strive to make sense of themselves in a migrant context. By zooming in on food and food spaces, I focus attention on material culture, emotional and multisensory experiences, and homemaking and place-making, often ignored in the literature on immigrant enterprise.

Research methods and study participants

To understand Peruvian immigrants’ culinary entrepreneurship, I immersed myself into Peruvian communities in and around Los Angeles in 2017–18, observing and working alongside women in their businesses, at community events, and in their homes. Research on immigrant entrepreneurship often relies on survey data or interviews with entrepreneurs and tends to

emphasize the business rather than the entrepreneur's experiences. As I sought to understand the social processes that played out in and around these ventures, an ethnographic approach was more fitting and allowed me to explore the extent of the Peruvian culinary scene in the area and how Peruvian communities interacted with these food spaces.

Following the recent gastronomic boom, Peruvian cuisine entered global culinary markets. Today, Peruvian restaurants are found in metropolises such as Barcelona, Dubai, and New York, but also in smaller cities where Peruvian immigrants have settled. The largest Peruvian restaurant scene outside Peru is probably found in Chile (Imilan 2014, 2015; Stefoni 2008) and in the United States, where most Peruvian immigrants reside. Across the United States, more than 984 Peruvian restaurants have been identified in 32 cities (Gonzales-Lara 2022). In the Southern Californian urban landscapes, Peruvian culinary ventures are less visible than other ethnic gastronomies, among which Mexican restaurants dominate, but the status Peruvian cuisine has achieved shapes the opportunities of Peruvian entrepreneurs.

In the 1960s, the first formal brick-and-mortar Peruvian restaurants opened in Los Angeles (Peru Village LA n.d.), and over the following decades, a Peruvian culinary scene slowly developed. The advent of the gastronomic boom in Peru accelerated its growth, and today more than 80 restaurants are spread across Los Angeles and surrounding suburbs, catering to an expanding Peruvian and Latinx population, but also to a broader clientele. Most of these businesses are established by Peruvian immigrants, who continue shaping the Peruvian food scene in the area. Reflecting the socioeconomically diverse Peruvian population, these establishments vary from upscale restaurants in affluent neighbourhoods to modestly priced food businesses in working-class areas. Those who look for home-made dishes or a cheap meal might prefer the food offered by a range of informal Peruvian businesses, from home-based semi-restaurants to catering and take-away businesses, some operated within small rental apartments, others in lavish two-story residences.

As I sought to explore the relationship between business ownership, the migration experience, and broader social relations, I conducted life-history interviews with 35 women entrepreneurs. Their stories are complemented by the views of family members, community leaders and other Peruvian immigrants in the area, including male food entrepreneurs. I recruited most of the women through snowball sampling and used restaurant websites and advertisements in mainstream media to connect with entrepreneurs with less strong ties to co-ethnic communities. I interviewed women who ran formal as well as informal restaurants, cake and pastry stores, catering businesses and markets. They were all born in Peru and had migrated to Southern California. All but three had resided in the United States for more than a decade. About half of them were undocumented immigrants, while

the other half had legal residence. The majority had opened their (first) business ten years or more ago. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and later coded and analyzed for relevant and recurrent themes that occurred inductively from the material. Extensive notes from fieldwork further informed the thematic analysis. Interviews were conducted in Spanish or English, and quotations in Spanish have been translated into English.

As a researcher with a notebook, with white skin, Scandinavian phenotype and a foreign accent when speaking Spanish, I was in many ways perceived as an outsider in the field. Yet my genuine love for and interest in Peruvian food, and being accompanied by my Peruvian husband and our children who all merged into the community in a way that I did not, afforded me a position as an “honorary insider” (Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2014, 50). Ten months in the field and my visibility at community events, where I helped women prepare *papa rellena* (potato stuffed with meat filling) and *arroz con pollo* (chicken in coriander-flavoured rice), granted me access to business spaces in the private sphere and allowed me to gain the trust of undocumented immigrants who initially saw me as a threat to their security. As I control how the participants’ stories are conveyed, I am in a privileged position in terms of the power relations that all research projects form part of. Thus, reflecting on positionality and accountability has been an important practice throughout all stages.

The study received ethics approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD #55871/519311), and, to protect their privacy, I have used pseudonyms for the participants, who were all informed about the study’s aims and gave their consent to participate. In the following, I present the Peruvian women’s stories and demonstrate how food businesses become resources for homemaking and for making sense of themselves in a complex context of reception.

Negotiating inclusion through distinction: food as a resource for homemaking

Few of the women I interviewed had dreamt of running a food business. Although their pathways into self-employment varied from blocked mobility and experiences of discrimination in the regular labour market to gendered motivations and necessity in the context of undocumented immigration status, many took advantage of a favourable opportunity structure generated by the gastronomic boom and the increasing recognition of Peruvian cuisine in the society of settlement. Although I listened to a few stories of women who had worked their way up from mere survival to successful business owners, entrepreneurship did not emerge as a panacea to upward economic mobility for Peruvian immigrant women. Corroborating previous research on immigrant entrepreneurship (Portes and Rumbaut 1990), their economic

success had been shaped by access to resources located at individual (class and educational status), group (family and ethnic community) and macro levels (institutional context and opportunity structure). In line with an intersectional approach (Valdez 2011), gender, ethnicity, race, class, and legal immigration status intersected in shaping differential access to these resources. However, the Peruvian women's stories serve as examples of hard work to achieve the dreams and hopes they had for a good life and a home for themselves and for their families in the United States. More importantly, their objectives were not exclusively pecuniary.

Almost all the Peruvian women in this study identified the society of settlement as the place they now called home. However, Peru was highly present in their lives, and their businesses served as spaces in which a continued relationship with the "homeland" was nurtured. For example, as we sat in Pilar's kitchen with a view toward the neatly manicured garden circling the family's two-story suburban house and swimming pool, she told me that not a day would pass by without the word "Peru" coming out of her mouth. Through her two Peruvian restaurants, both located in upper-middle-class neighbourhoods, she engaged daily with her "homeland" culture and reproduced memories from Peru. First, I felt slightly impatient when the women seemed more interested in telling me about the food they offered than responding to the focus of my study, how entrepreneurship shapes negotiations of gender, home, and belonging. I had sought out food businesses due to easy access. Gradually, however, I came to understand that the materiality and sensory dimensions of food and food places played an imperative role in the way the women made themselves at home.

In interviews and informal conversations I had during fieldwork, culinary business spaces emerged as a home in the public space. First, it was presented as a home for the entrepreneurs and their families. Several women spent most of their time in the business, which also constituted a space for interacting with family and friends. Restaurant owners further contended that their businesses constituted a home for other Peruvians. My own observations, along with informal conversations I had with Peruvians in the area, confirmed these claims. "*Es un pedacito de mi país en Los Ángeles* [It's a piece of my country in Los Angeles]", one Peruvian told me. Another identified his visits to Peruvian restaurants as an alternative to taking a plane to Peru. Moreover, culinary businesses offered a physical space where Peruvian immigrant associations organized meetings and events to gather the Peruvian communities in the area. Thus, within these food establishments, a range of homemaking practices were performed, and the culinary business realm turned into spaces of belonging for Peruvian immigrants.

Culinary businesses further constituted spaces in which the women were able to present Peruvian culture to the broader public. In fact, several women identified themselves as ambassadors of their country of origin. Their stories

reveal that commodifying and displaying *peruanidad* (Peruvianness) had become a request for visibility and recognition. In many Peruvian restaurants I visited, *peruanidad* was presented in ways that appealed to all the senses. The smells, tastes, and textures of Peruvian dishes were frequently accompanied by images of the majestic landscape surrounding the ruins of Machu Picchu, replicas of the mysterious Nazca lines, or of ancient Inca ornaments, colourful textiles representing pre-Columbian weaving techniques, as well as national symbols such as flags, celebrities, and cultural and historical heroes. These multisensory milieus were testimonials to the deliberate efforts culinary business owners had made to create home-like spaces in the public arena, but also to claim representation and recognition. Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri note that minority groups' various forms of requesting visibility implies "a demand for social recognition which entails becoming full actors who can display their own identity and specificity in public space" (2014, 646). Similarly, my findings show that Peruvian culinary businesses constitute a site not only for economic incorporation, but a scene where *peruanidad* can be displayed in the urban landscape along with demands for social recognition.

The elevated status of Peruvian cuisine has given value to these claims, and Peruvian culinary businesses have become spaces where status is negotiated. Gabriela grew up in a middle-class family in Peru. When she was a teenager, her mother brought her to the United States, where she obtained a master's degree and married a white American with high educational attainments. White-collar jobs allowed the couple to settle in an affluent neighbourhood. Yet, class status did not prevent Gabriela from facing discrimination. Once, the local swimming club even denied her the chance to pick up her daughter, as they had mistaken her for being the family's Latinx domestic worker. Gabriela and I were enjoying a meal of *anticuchos* (marinated grilled beef heart skewers) and *yucca* (cassava) fries which we dipped in creamy *Huancaína* sauce (dipping flavoured with yellow Peruvian chili peppers) when she suddenly hushed me and exclaimed: "This is what I like! This makes me happy. Look at my restaurant. What did you hear? ... English, right? [...] And that's what I wanted ... my culture to be known." She was referring to the white Anglo and fluently English-speaking lunch crowd that had filled the dining area. With pride she showed me her entrepreneurial achievements of serving Peruvian lunch to wealthy white Californians. In concert with food columns in mainstream Angelino newspapers (Solomon 2012), her customers equated Peruvian cuisine with status, which provided Gabriela with an important asset in a neighbourhood in which she had experienced discrimination. To Gabriela and other Peruvian women, food and food discourses had become "material and symbolic resources" (Cancellieri 2017, 58) and a "culinary cultural power" (Vester 2015, 199) that they drew upon to negotiate recognition in a migrant context.

Food has become a primary identity marker for Peruvian transnational communities (Imilan 2015; Alcalde 2018). Within a complex context of reception, it provided the Peruvian women in this study with an important resource for homemaking. I argue that, instead of assimilating into a mainstream American culture, the women drew strategically on food discourses to negotiate inclusion through distinction. Homemaking is about “setting specific social relationships that are negotiated and reproduced over time, more or less successfully, against a variety of material backgrounds” (Boccagni 2017, 12). Peruvian food and food spaces formed part of the materiality against which Peruvian culinary entrepreneurs negotiated a position in the social fabric of the receiving society. Mares contends that “[f]ood is central to the longing for home and the often painful struggle to accommodate to new ways of being in the world” and “a vital piece of maintaining a sense of self in a new environment” (2012, 335). Gabaccia (2000, 9) further notes that praising a group’s cuisine as superior is a way of celebrating, or elevating, the group itself. On a quest to make sense of themselves, their past, present, and future, the Peruvian women I talked to embraced the positive narrative surrounding Peruvian food in order to elevate *peruanidad* and position themselves as individuals and as a group in the society of settlement. This position, however, was not only negotiated vis-à-vis a white Anglo population but also in relation to other minoritized groups.

Not Mexican, but Peruvian: navigating Latinxness and constructing counter-narratives

Foodways and food discourses constitute a site in which power and resistance are intertwined (Vester 2015). I found that Peruvian culinary entrepreneurs draw on food discourses to distance themselves from and create counter-narratives to dominating xenophobic discourses toward Latinx migrants, and culinary businesses offer a space upon which these claims are made.

October is a busy month for Peruvians in Los Angeles, as they celebrate the Peruvian Catholic patron *El Señor de los Milagros* (Lord of Miracles) at various events. It is also the month in which Peruvians gather to participate in the traditional Mexican celebration *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery. To me, the 2017 festival was a spectacular event. People with painted faces and dressed in colourful costumes moved through the cemetery among countless altars scattered around the graves. The Mexican altars were decorated with sugar skulls and orange and yellow marigolds honouring dead heroes or loved ones who had passed away. Almost hidden among these radiant colours, I found the Peruvian altar. Decorated in red and white, symbolizing the Peruvian flag, it was less flamboyant and smaller than most of the Mexican structures. What struck

me the most, however, was how the Peruvian altar constituted a visual representation of what it was like to be Peruvian in a “Mexican” U.S. city.

Shared cultural and linguistic traits tie Latinxs from distinct national origin groups together in the United States. During fieldwork, I witnessed friendships and alliances between Peruvians and Mexicans, as well as Central and South Americans. Within the large Latinx population in Southern California, Peruvian entrepreneurs found a range of resources that have benefited their ventures. Latinxs constitute an extensive co-ethnic market, and a large Latinx population from lower socio-economic strata serve as a pool of cheap labour for Peruvian food businesses. Moreover, due to a numerous population and deep historical roots in the area, Mexican communities enjoy a higher level of “institutional completeness” (Breton 1964) than Peruvian communities. Finally, a range of programmes, events, and organizations specifically target Latinx entrepreneurs, and Latinx commodity chains in which Spanish is the main language benefit the Peruvian entrepreneurs that I observed. A large Latinx population hence facilitates the economic incorporation of Peruvian business owners in Southern California. However, co-ethnicity does not guarantee solidarity and trust, and may even lead to exploitation and oppression (Sanders and Nee 1987; Zhou 2009).

In California, the presence of a large Mexican population that is subject to stigmas, discrimination, and constant threats of deportation and detention, has influenced the Peruvian women’s homemaking processes. Some reported experiences of discrimination, often because people identified them as Mexicans, and hence also with the same stereotypes that Mexicans face, that is, of undocumented immigration status, poverty, and low educational attainments. This conflation is due to racial/ethnic and class markers, such as professional status, darker skin colour and/or the use of the Spanish language. Lighter skin colour, marriage to white Americans, English language proficiency, as well as class and occupational status, on the other hand, placed some Peruvian women in a more privileged position in the society of settlement. Yet, as Gabriela’s example above demonstrates, neighbourhood composition also matters. Despite high education and class status, Gabriela stood out in an affluent, majority white neighbourhood due to her darker skin colour and because she speaks English with an accent. Walking beside her blond, blue-eyed husband, she had experienced people shouting: “Hey! Look at that Mexican ...”

Revealing their national identity, however, allowed Peruvian women – independent of skin colour, English language proficiency, occupational or legal immigration status – to counter experiences of discrimination. Yessica was one of the women in this study who had crossed the U.S. – Mexican border without authorization. Representing a typical rags-to-riches narrative, she had been able to regularize her status and was running a Peruvian restaurant. “[A]ll my life they have mistaken me for being Mexican,” she said. “And

when you say that you are from Peru?" I asked her. "Then they change [...] Then they ask you other things, as if they are treating you more like a friend."

Other women shared similar stories. I interviewed Victoria in her modest kitchen, which was the base for her informal catering business. Like Yessica, Victoria had managed to regularize her undocumented immigration status. While serving me a glass of home-made *chicha morada* (purple corn drink), she explained: "When you say that you are Peruvian it is a little bit like they change, like if they see you as more cultivated, more different." Being conflated with Mexicans made these women subject to the same manifestations of racialization and discrimination that Mexicans face. Highlighting their Peruvian background, however, granted them a different position.

The positive narrative surrounding Peruvian cuisine has become a resource Peruvian business owners turn to in order to counter negative stereotypes toward an ascribed Latinx identity. Andrea, an American citizen and owner of multiple Peruvian restaurants, all in middle – and upper-class neighbourhoods, noted that "before I was not proud; now I really am proud of Peru, because I see that I represent a part of Peru." In a different neighbourhood, Gerthy and her husband Jorge ran a Peruvian pastry store, a family business which they had been able to formalize despite undocumented immigration status. Resonating with Andrea's story, Jorge explained that *peruanidad* had now turned into an asset which served to mitigate the negative effects of the position their Latinx heritage gave them in society:

There was a time when we did not utter much the name *peruano* [Peruvian] initially, because there was a certain reaction toward what was Latino ... right. But as the product penetrated economic markets, now, we must put ... "Peruvian pastry" or "Peruvian bakery," or "Peruvian products." Or just the word "Peru" ... So, when people recognize, "Oh, you are from Peru" ... And we take advantage of that. Before, many times, as Latinos, we felt inferior when saying that I am Latino. But this is helping us a bit more now.

The historical shift Andrea and Jorge alluded to was linked to the positive framing of Peruvian food in the media and public discourse following the Peruvian gastronomic boom, from which these entrepreneurs drew strategically to promote their businesses and enhance revenue, but also to counter negative portrayals of Latinxs. Mexican food also conquered American palates (Arellano 2013). However, it has been denied social status and is associated with working-class vendors, fast-food chains, and street food. Although Mexican food started to make its way upscale in the United States in the 1980s, and despite recent interest in improving the status of street food and the upsurge of a range of high-end Mexican restaurants, stereotypes of Mexican cuisine have endured in the North American imagination (Pilcher 2008). The culinary entrepreneurs in this study, however, were able to draw on narratives of Peruvian gastronomy to distance themselves from

an imposed Mexican identity and create counter-narratives to improve their position within complex racial/ethnic hierarchies.

Whose Peru? Reproducing, reimagining, and redefining *peruanidad*

Whereas the Peruvian women reproduced and performed *peruanidad* in the business space to negotiate inclusion through distinction in the encounter with a white Anglo population and to make sense of themselves in relation to other Latinxs, these spaces further constituted contested sites in which power structures from the country of origin were both challenged and reinscribed by Peruvian immigrants from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic-cultural backgrounds.

On the one hand, these culinary businesses contributed to creating unity among the Peruvian population, which, due to socioeconomic diversity, was scattered across L.A. neighbourhoods. The food offered by a range of informal business owners was often identified as the most important ingredient at cultural events that attracted Peruvians across neighbourhoods and class lines, and although price range shaped the composition of Peruvian restaurants' clientele, some reported that they travelled long distances to visit popular Peruvian restaurants. The unifying power of culinary businesses, however, was challenged by internal structures of differentiation.

Traditional art and adornments from the rural Peruvian highlands were often used as decoration in the food spaces I visited. Not everyone agreed, however, that this represented the Peru they remembered and cherished. During my time in the field, I frequently met with Leonardo, a Peruvian who came from a white middle-class background in Lima but had spent the last two decades in the United States. He had little contact with Peruvian immigrant communities but often visited Peruvian restaurants to get a taste of the "homeland." In one of our many conversations about Peruvian culinary businesses, he asked me: "Why do they have to bring the Inca into everything?" None of the restaurants he used to frequent in Lima had names in the indigenous language Quechua or were decorated with ethnic symbols. Ernesto, a Peruvian immigrant community leader that I interviewed, was of rural Andean heritage and came with similar accusations: "Here they try to abuse the image of Peru, that means, they use Inca symbols or other things in order to ensure that there will be clients from Peru." While Leonardo was less interested in seeing his country represented by a Peru that was unfamiliar to him – a rural and indigenous Peru associated with backwardness and poverty – Ernesto accused white middle – and upper-class culinary entrepreneurs from the coastland of appropriating "his" Peru and presenting it as if it formed part of their own experiences.

Scholars have criticized the claim of inclusion raised by promoters of the Peruvian gastronomic boom, referring to how white elite chefs include the food culture from the Andean and Amazon regions by transforming previously devalued foodways into celebrated dishes, making them almost unrecognizable to those who usually consume such foods, but acceptable and familiar to a white urban and cosmopolitan consumer base (Alcalde 2018). I observed similar practices among Peruvian immigrant business owners who served well-off Southern Californian customers. Sofia, who ran a Peruvian restaurant in a popular upper-middle-class city outside Los Angeles, noted that “to grow in the gastronomic world, there must be fusion. [...] The Peruvian restaurants, those who win gold medals on a global level, it is no longer traditional food.” Most restaurants I visited that catered for a wealthy clientele had toned down the use of ethnic symbols or employed cultural artefacts designed in a stylized cosmopolitan way. They also served a translated version of traditional Peruvian dishes. While this kind of “fusion” is increasingly common in Peruvian restaurants located in affluent Limeño neighbourhoods, it has become an important strategy for culinary entrepreneurs in Southern California who target a clientele that expects Peruvian food to be fine dining.

Most of the Peruvian women I interviewed, however, targeted a mixed clientele, both in terms of class and ethnicity, many of them catering to a predominantly Latinx customer base. These business owners often employed ethnic symbols and/or served what they identified as authentic Peruvian food, to attract Peruvians as well as other customers looking for an “ethnic” and “exotic” experience. To them, reproducing *peruanidad* in the business space was a juggling act and not always well received among other Peruvians. Elisa, an undocumented immigrant and restaurant owner, had added broccoli to the Peruvian signature dish *Lomo Saltado* to attract Asian customers in her working-class and ethnically diverse neighbourhood. Based on marinated strips of sirloin, *Lomo Saltado* is normally served with potato, but with broccoli it resembles an Asian-style stir-fry. Although the option of potato was available for those who preferred the customary Peruvian style, she told me that some Peruvian customers were furious that these practices represent their culture in the society of settlement.

Some Peruvians contended, however, that only informal businesses offer “real” authentic food. While preparing home-style dishes and inviting their clients into private domestic spaces, informal culinary business owners construct a narrative that connects informal business activities to authenticity and quality. They condemned the practice of many formal Peruvian restaurants of hiring Mexican or Central American cooks, which provides informal ventures with a legitimate claim that their food – home-made by Peruvians – is more authentic than the food served in formal businesses. Marco and Diana had turned their living room into a semi-restaurant, where people in

their working-class neighbourhood and wider social network stopped by daily to purchase home-made Peruvian food. Marco noted that “here they try the real Peruvian food, and they are disappointed when they go to a restaurant.” As such, informal culinary entrepreneurs, many of them undocumented immigrants like Marco and Diana, draw on ideas about authenticity and discourses about Peruvian food as *haute cuisine* to make sense of themselves within culinary hierarchies, as well as within a society in which they often constitute a stigmatized minority, and produce a positive narrative around their irregular activities. Humble and run-down apartments are turned into sites where Peruvian dishes are served and presented as gourmet, providing these entrepreneurs with a status marker in their local communities.

The meaning of *peruanidad* and how it should be presented in a migrant context is hence negotiated among Peruvian immigrants who further draw on *peruanidad* to negotiate status and distinction from the negative stereotypes associated with the Latinx, and particularly the Mexican label. Together, these narratives shed light on the complex ways in which intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and legal immigration status shape Peruvian women’s experiences with migration and business ownership, and the role culinary businesses play in forging transnational subjectivities.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Peruvian culinary entrepreneurs in Southern California draw on food as a material and symbolic resource to negotiate inclusion through distinction, and that their businesses constitute important sites where these processes are facilitated. Whereas other studies have found that immigrants’ culinary businesses serve as sites in which national identities are forged and boundaries demarcated between the values and habits of the country of origin and those of the country of settlement (e.g. Miranda-Nieto and Boccagni 2020), this study moves beyond simple and dyadic “home-land”/host society frames and finds that Peruvian immigrants in Southern California reimagine and redefine *peruanidad* through encounters with both the mainstream white population and with other minoritized groups. In line with previous scholarship (Alcalde 2022; Berg 2015), I observe that Peruvian immigrants bring with them a set of experiences and notions of who they are in relation to other Peruvians from different class segments and racial/ethnic backgrounds. As Peruvians grapple with making sense of themselves in a new and demographically complex environment, they move in and out of a range of intersecting ascribed and self-avowed subjectivities (racial/ethnic, panethnic, classed, legal, etc.), and position themselves within a matrix of power relations linked to racial/ethnic and class hierarchies, informed by migration as well as food discourses. These processes are

intimately linked to place and to local experiences. In a “Mexican” U.S. city such as Los Angeles, Peruvian culinary entrepreneurs capitalize on food discourses and create counter-narratives to xenophobic portrayals of Latinx immigrants, constructed around notions of race, ethnicity, class, and illegality.

The Peruvian women’s stories demonstrate that the outcomes of immigrants’ business ownership move beyond financial revenue. Entrepreneurship has been presented as an alternative pathway to upward economic mobility for certain immigrant groups in the United States, such as the Chinese (Portes and Zhou 1992), Koreans (Light and Bonacich 1988), and Cubans (Portes and Rumbaut 1990). Why these groups are considered more entrepreneurial than other minority groups, such as Mexicans and Blacks, is explained by the way individual – and group-level resources interact with the macro-level institutional context and broader opportunity structure (Portes and Rumbaut 1990). These interactive approaches may explain why some Peruvian women in this study had entered the middle class through business ownership whereas others were running low-income informal businesses in order to survive, with few prospects of formalization or increasing revenue. Yet, they do not capture the significant role these businesses play in the lives of the immigrants who run them, and how entrepreneurial practices form part of broader social processes, such as immigrants’ search for home and belonging. Arguing for a homemaking optic to understand the immigrant experience, Boccagni and Hondagneu-Sotelo invite us to look at “the practical and situated ways in which migrants negotiate their claims for inclusion, recognition and ultimately membership” (2023, 158), drawing our attention to migrants’ interaction with particular social environments and the material circumstances in which their life trajectories are embedded. By bringing novel insight on immigrant homemaking into dialogue with the ethnic entrepreneurship literature, this paper extends the field, as it nudges scholars to look beyond immigrant entrepreneurs as exclusively economic actors. The Peruvian women that I interviewed were also spatial actors who engaged with material culture to bring meaning into the business space. These meaning-making processes informed the way Peruvian immigrants negotiated recognition and social status in the society of settlement. Hence, the business space emerges as an important site for homemaking in which claims for belonging are raised.

Whereas ethnicity has been celebrated as an asset for business success and upward economic mobility, race and other intersecting dimensions of social stratification are often ignored by scholars who seek to understand the dynamics of immigrant entrepreneurship (Gold 2016; Valdez 2011). The Peruvian women’s experiences demonstrate the intimate relationship between experiences of racialization and the production of ethnicity in culinary spaces and elucidate how these processes intersect with other axes of inequality. Chiming with promises of inclusion in the narrative surrounding

the Peruvian gastronomic boom, food becomes a social weapon that Peruvian culinary entrepreneurs employ in an immigrant business setting, not only for economic gains, but to make sense of themselves in a complex context of reception. Ironically – and more in tune with scholarly critique of the optimistic discourse of the boom – as the Peruvian women in this study create counter-narratives to discriminatory stereotypes of Latinxs, they simultaneously reproduce unequal social relationships within which food discourses and practices are constructed. Consequently, social inequalities are upheld. As such, the Peruvian women contest unequal relationships produced by racial/ethnic and socioeconomic stratification, which are reinforced through the power relations that govern South-North migration. They do not, however, reformulate the dominant controlling images of race, ethnicity, class, and legal status. Nevertheless, culinary business spaces emerge as powerful sites in which Peruvian immigrants negotiate a position in the society of settlement and a place where complex and multi-layered social processes play out, as they strive to make themselves at home in a new place.

Note

1. The article is based on Chapters 6 and 7 of the author's doctoral dissertation (Corrales-Øverlid 2021).

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