

Lavash Café & The Mediterranean Experience

Undergraduate Research Thesis

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Introduction

The Journey

When I first intended to conduct an undergraduate research thesis three years ago, I had no idea what kind of a project I was about to delve into. There were no guides, or advisors who clarified the path for me and explained the steps that are needed to be taken in order to accomplish such a task. I was on my own and struggled to get my research formulated. I had approached an instructor to help supervise and advise. Even though he is the individual who motivated this research topic and my interests in the field, he was quite vague in regards to the process that I should undertake as an undergraduate. I worked with him for two years without realizing that he was not faculty, but a graduate student.

Due to the confusions around research as an undergrad new to this kind of academia, I was fearful, overwhelmed and doubtful of ever seeing a final product. I've researched a little during my time with my instructor and was going to go ahead with interviewing individuals without IRB permission. Just two days before the first interview, an academic advisor alerted me and clarified some of the steps that need to be completed prior to conducting interviews. I reached out to the Undergraduate Research Office on campus, made appointments, attended information sessions, but they were not clear regarding research in the humanities. Rather, most of their attention was garnered to science and lab research.

It wasn't till the end of my second year in this journey that I tumbled across and immediately signed up for a consultation with an advisor for Human Subjects Research. The advisor gave me a clear list of what needed to be done. It was a start in the right direction. I also realized near the end of Spring semester of that year that my instructor wasn't a faculty member. I quickly scrambled to find a faculty member to supervise my research, reaching out to a

professor who was unable to help due to a sudden job opportunity at Yale. Thankfully, this Professor was kind enough to introduce me to my current advisor, Professor Johanna Sellman.

So, after two years of struggle and uncertainty, my research journey officially began and throughout my senior year I learned much from this experience. It widened my perspective and truly introduced me to the world of research and its potential. This is my beginning, a dream realized after three years of effort. Though I'm thankful for my experience regardless of the time it took and the obstacles I went through I hope, in the future, undergraduate students who plan to conduct research in the humanities don't find much difficulty in seeing their research aspirations become a reality.

Chapter 1: The Trinity

The term “Mediterranean” was first introduced and brought about as a cookery concept single handedly by Elizabeth David (1913-1992), in an English cookbook. David is probably the most remarkable cookery writer of her time. Her book *A Book of Mediterranean Food* (1950) came about in a post-World War era when people were hungry for travel, adventure, renovating their kitchens and rediscovering the richness of the region around them. David expertly wrote a book that marveled and mesmerized the reader. Her book was not a cook book, but a combination of experiences that can come to life in the kitchen. The ways she described and illustrated the Mediterranean seeped into the general understanding of what the Mediterranean is. A vibrant, colorful and romantic place with delicious food and adventure waiting to happen. This book not only set the standard for what the Mediterranean was, but also caused much of the writers and novelists to write about the Mediterranean in a similar fashion. David’s work covered cuisines from all over the Mediterranean. Places include Greece, Cyprus, Italy and little from her travels to Egypt.

Even though she wrote recipes from countries all over the region, many countries today are left out of this new Mediterranean concept. In other words, some countries would be classified as Middle Eastern only, with no relevance to the Mediterranean. This may be due to the political climate of the region. It’s a true phenomenon seen today. Perhaps the most visible example of this would be the negative rhetoric seen in the 2015-2016 American presidential race. Many cultures and faiths are exaggerated and fictionalized. Today, especially in a post 9/11 era, the Middle East is the biggest victim, being the center of foreign political, economic and social tensions. Western media, film and fiction books don’t always portray it in a positive light either.

The use of the term Mediterranean is an interesting one. Particularly because not all countries of the Mediterranean utilize the term when referring to themselves, but it is easily done here in the United States. Mediterranean countries include among others France, Spain, Italy, Greece, and Portugal, Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories and Israel, as well as North African countries like Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Because of the distance, it's no surprise that people, Americans in particular, are quick to label many of these countries Mediterranean and assume that in one way or another there is a homogenous romantic characteristic to them. Specifically regarding Greece and Italy. So, it's interesting to see a local restaurant, Lavash Café, characterize itself as Mediterranean.

Lavash café is located in Columbus, Oh. Its local to The Ohio State University campus, accessible to the university's students, faculty, staff as well as the greater Columbus community. It's been around since 2008. Lavash café's owner is a Palestinian man who is always present at the restaurant and is active in the community, serving the community delicious food and donating to various groups and organizations both on the college campus and outside.

Diners who enter, walk in to the aroma of grilled meat and seasoned food and view of the shawarma behind the counter and sheesh kababs on display. There are also a variety of sweets and cakes. The menu offers hummus, falafel, grape leaves, lentil soups and much more of what one would find at an Arab owned restaurant. The scenery is an interesting mix of suburban and middle eastern, with bright warm and cool colors reminiscent of the Mediterranean on the wall as well as murals of a distant desert and Middle Eastern town. There is a special menu, offering ethnic Levantine, Turkish and North African dishes. Outside the restaurant, there is a large canopy of grapevines shading the outside seating area and an array of different plants and vegetables planted beside it. The restaurant is always busy with diners coming in and out

constantly, clientele from all backgrounds and walks of life. Its success may be reflective of the delicious food they serve. It may also be popular because Mediterranean cuisine is all the rage, especially because of its reputation as a healthier food choice.

Just as the onion, celery and bell pepper was popularized as the holy trinity for Cajun & Creole cuisine by Paul Prudhomme, the Mediterranean has its special three foundational ingredients.¹ The trinity of the olive, grape and bread.² However, each country has its own culinary trinity. There are as many trinities as there are countries in the region. A restaurant couldn't possibly offer everything that is 'Mediterranean?' How can the concept of the 'Mediterranean' conceptualize the immense diversity, history, culture, and savory food of the distant sea?

Mediterranean: Historical Renderings, Unity & Division

The Mediterranean is both a geographical space and a concept. Despite the presence of national borders, it is a crossroads, a place where cultures, cuisines, and peoples meet. It includes everything from North Africa to the Levant, Turkey, Eastern Europe, Southern Europe and Spain. It precedes the transnational. All the areas bordering the Mediterranean are intertwined. The region has a deep interconnected history and evolved as empires, war, trade and knowledge passed through. It has been vibrant at times and dark at others (i.e. world wars, fascism, etc.). To many, the Mediterranean will mean different things and signify different understandings. It

¹ Maloney, A. (2017, December 31). 'The Trinity': How onion, celery and bell pepper got that name. Retrieved from

http://www.nola.com/food/index.ssf/2017/08/origin_of_cajun_trinity_how_on.html

² Wright, C.A. (1999). *A Mediterranean feast: story of the birth of the celebrated cuisines of the Mediterranean, from the merchants of Venice to the barbary Corsairs: with more than 500 recipes*. New York: Morrow

brings forth different images and perspectives depending on the what horizon the viewer sees it from.

So how is the Mediterranean defined? This is a difficult concept to grasp because the Mediterranean is defined in various ways in different parts of the world. In Arabic, the term, *al-bahr al'abyad almutawasit* (i.e. Mediterranean), usually refers to the sea and the surrounding regions geographically as well. The term does exist as a concept, but is not as developed as it is in the English language and literature. Preliminary findings show that, when the term is used for purposes other than a geographical marker, it's used in a North African/Iberian context. For example in Hayat Kara's *al-Nisā' fī faḍā' al-Baḥr al-Abyaḍ al-Mutawassiṭ : al-ṭaqāfah wa-al-mujtama' fī al-‘aṣr al-wasīṭ* (Women In The Medieval Mediterranean: Culture and Society), Kara states:

والتأثير الحاصل بين شرق البحر الأبيض المتوسط وغربه، إذ تكشف الحفريات، فيما يتعلق بالمقابر الأندلسية، عن التأثير المشرقي الذي يتبين من خلال الألواح الحجرية المستطيلة الشكل المزودة بأقواس، ومعظمها واردٌ من مقابر مدينة المرية وما يماثلها في الشكل والحجم، محفوظة بمتحف فن الآثار الإسلامية بالقاهرة.

ومن المحتمل، فيما يقول ليوبولد تورّس بالباس، أن هذا الأسلوب كان قادماً من شرق البحر الأبيض المتوسط، وانتشر في مدينة المرية إبان عهد المرابطين، ومن هذه المدينة انتشر إلى باقي أقطار الأندلس.³

³ Qāra, H. (2011). *Al-Nisā' fī faḍā' al-Baḥr al-Abyaḍ al-Mutawassiṭ: Al-ṭaqāfa wa-al-muḡtama' fī al-‘aṣr al-wasīṭ*. Al-Ribāṭ: Dār Abī Raqrāq li-al-Ṭibā'a wa-al-Naṣr, pg. 26-27.

In this particular example, the passage explains the appearance of Eastern Mediterranean influence in Muslim Spain during the Middle Ages. This influence appeared in the tombstones used on both side of the sea. A more developed concept of the Mediterranean as encompassing culture, cuisine, diversity, history, etc. of the region does not seem to be highly developed as a unified idea in the Language.

There are similarities in regards to the English definition of the Mediterranean.

According to the Webster's New World dictionary the Mediterranean is "something related to or characteristic of the Mediterranean Sea, the countries bordering the sea or its inhabitants...the Mediterranean Sea or a native of a country bordering the Mediterranean Sea."⁴ As far as this definition it concerned, the Mediterranean is a geographical region that incorporates all along its coasts. This definition is broad and though it incorporates everything within the context of the Mediterranean it does not do justice to the diversity and complexity of the region.

The Mediterranean also has different contexts for different time periods. What we know as the Mediterranean is a result of hundreds of years, significant events, and different ruling cultures all sculpting the region one by one, from the Islamic civilization, it's Golden Age and agricultural revolution, to the Renaissance and the Age of Explorations. In recent history, the significant events of the World Wars left a deep wound which led to a period of redefining and rediscovering the Mediterranean and Mediterranean cuisine.⁵ Today, the adversities befalling Syria and much of the Levant associated the Mediterranean Sea with the refugee crisis, migration and movement of peoples from Asia and Africa to Europe. People are making the dangerous trip across the sea in search for a better life, most of them hailing from Middle Eastern countries.

⁴ http://www.yourdictionary.com/mediterranean#websters?direct_search_result=yes

⁵ Cooper, A. (2011). *Writing at the kitchen table: the authorized biography of Elizabeth David*. London: Faber and Faber. Pg. 163 & 144.

When analyzing the terms Mediterranean and Middle East, it's not surprise that the two do not evoke the same emotions, senses, images, and feelings. There is a political connotation involved with the term Middle East as a result of Western media as well as national and international Western interests. Islam is seen mostly negatively by the West and often times as the enemy. The reality of the matter is that this stems from the centuries of orientalism present in the West.⁶ Contrary to popular Western beliefs, the Islamic civilization contributed greatly to the diverse cuisines of the Mediterranean today. What we think of as the Mediterranean, in its imagery, its food and heritage wasn't there centuries ago until the beginning of the Islamic civilization. The agricultural revolution that took place during the Islamic Golden Age is what allowed Muslims to innovate, discover, build upon and improve past civilizations' knowledge.⁷ They introduced food like the citrus and eggplant into the lands bordering the Mediterranean. They excelled in cookery, created botanic gardens, etc.⁸ Yet, Islam and the Middle East would not be evoked in the minds of people when the term Mediterranean is used, even though people of this area and faith play an enormous role in the region, not only in history but in current times as well.

Classification of Mediterranean countries differs from one country to another. Often, a variety of countries that are along the Mediterranean Sea would be classified only as Middle Eastern. This is generally encompassing the countries of northern Africa, the Levant and Turkey. Countries like Italy, France and Greece on the other hand are 'Mediterranean' as much as they

⁶ Said, E. W. (2010). *Covering Islam how the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*. London: Vintage Books pg. 5.

⁷ Wright, C.A. (1999). *A Mediterranean feast: story of the birth of the celebrated cuisines of the Mediterranean, from the merchants of Venice to the barbary Corsairs: with more than 500 recipes*. New York: Morrow

⁸ Ibid.

are European, but others such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Syria are not often included in the way that the Mediterranean is imagined. Despite this, some food writers claim these latter countries as a part of the Mediterranean. Usually, these writers are of Arab descent. For example, in her book, *Mediterranean Street Food*, a Lebanese American writer, Anissa Helou, writes on Mediterranean street cuisine from mostly majority Arab Mediterranean countries. She makes it clear through her writing that based on her experiences Lebanese food and French food are both synonymous with the Mediterranean.⁹

The Mediterranean can be divided into three regions. The northern Mediterranean, the southern Mediterranean and the eastern Mediterranean. The northern Mediterranean includes the regions south of Europe and the islands off the coast of Italy and Greece. The southern Mediterranean consists of the North African countries. The Eastern Mediterranean is comprised of the Levant and Turkey. There are differences between these areas, mainly between European south and African North. One will find that the poorer areas are the more populated places and the northern areas are the more wealthier places, the first world countries. “40 percent of the total population of the Mediterranean region is concentrated along its southern shores, yet only six percent of the total GNP is generated there.”¹⁰

Population and economy are not the only differences, “cultural and religious diversity” along the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean are present as well.¹¹ So much so, that this division is “incorrectly portrayed as a horizontal diving line, separating the European

⁹ Helou, A. (2006). *Mediterranean street food: stories, soups, snacks, sandwiches, barbecues, sweets, and more, from Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East*. New York: William Morrow.

¹⁰ Joffé, G., Niblock, T., & Aliboni, R. (1996). *Security challenges in the Mediterranean region*. London: Frank Cass. (pg. 188)

¹¹ Ibid, 188.

north from an ‘arc crisis’ in the African South.”¹² These differences are also dictated in the orientalist view between the division along the West and the Near East. They play to “alienate” the West from “rediscovering the common ground” and the “rich” history they share with the East.¹³ Levantine people, for example, have more in common with their Cyprus and Greece counterparts than they do with the people in the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁴ The major difference between them is that they have different faiths and speak different languages.¹⁵

The West, Europe particularly, has a desire to disconnect the south from the north. One of the major reasons why there is a surge in migration of peoples from the south to the north is to attain work, education, a better life or escape crises. Even though Europe consists of mostly first world countries, there seems to be a dislike in having their southern neighbors relying on them.

"We have never been further away from the 'Third World first' perspectives of the 1970s and early 80s, which advocated the collective self-reliance of the south and called for southern Mediterranean countries to delink themselves from the world capitalist economy controlled by the north"¹⁶

Thus, there is a distaste for intercontinental movement. Some forces in the North are against an influx of people traveling from the Eastern Mediterranean, Near East and North Africa to their

¹² Joffé, G., Niblock, T., & Aliboni, R. (1996). *Security challenges in the Mediterranean region*. London: Frank Cass. (pg. 191)

¹³ Ibid, 191.

¹⁴ Ra‘ad, B. L. (2010). *Hidden histories: Palestine and the Eastern Mediterranean*. London: Pluto Press. Pg. 8

¹⁵ Ibid, 8.

¹⁶ Joffé, G., Niblock, T., & Aliboni, R. (1996). *Security challenges in the Mediterranean region*. London: Frank Cass. (pg. 188) pg, 83.

lands. The 'Middle Sea' has become a "Berlin Wall, a frontier which is hard to cross."¹⁷ Could this barrier transcend a holistic perspective on the Mediterranean?

This seems to be the case. There are issues that arise even with geographical terminologies. The politics surrounding the area has taken a toll on the way it is understood. The Southern and Northern units of the Mediterranean are not different or "distinct entities" from one another.¹⁸ Each country along the Mediterranean shores has its own struggles and battles in regards to its governance, economy, and society. In their book, *Security Challenges of the Mediterranean Region*, Joffé, Niblock and Aliboni point out there are discrepancies when they write, "based on a simple geographical division may lead observers to neglect some of the dimensions which impinge on relations between and among the states of the Mediterranean."¹⁹ Both sides of the sea are "linked into political, cultural and economic groupings with other states in their areas"²⁰ This is a question of where loyalties lie. Another aspect of division between 'north' and 'south' Mediterranean is the fact that they identify and may align with other groups, political parties, cultures and beliefs that are not parallel with each other. This may in turn help add bricks to the 'Berlin wall' which makes it difficult to see past this as a reality of the complexities of the Mediterranean rather than just an East and West divide.

The Eastern Mediterranean is an interesting terminology for the Levantine. The term invokes in the imagination the distant place of Europe, Greece, sunset coasts, olive and bread. Not the same baggage that the Near East may have. This kind of terminology drowns out Arab presence, just as Johanna Kadi suggests with the term "West Asia" in her book, *Food for our*

¹⁷ Joffé, G., Niblock, T., & Aliboni, R. (1996). *Security challenges in the Mediterranean region*. London: Frank Cass. (pg. 65)

¹⁸ Ibid, 115.

¹⁹ Ibid, 115.

²⁰ Ibid, 115.

Grandmothers.²¹ Even though West Asia does not feel like the terminology of the "oppressor" to her— as it does with the term “Middle East”— it includes Arabs and other Middle Eastern people.²² This term would also increase the visibility of Arabs living in Western countries who "identify as West Asian" and help "forge connections with other people of Asia."²³ The downside, Kadi explains, is that Arabs become invisible when this term is used, that most people in the West will seldom think Arab with hearing “West Asian.”²⁴ A terminology that holds Arab relevance, one that Arabs in the West can identify as, has yet to become mainstream.

After the Great World Wars, as Mediterranean food was ‘rediscovered’ at the hands of Elizabeth David through her book on Mediterranean food, —which gained popularity after John Lehmann, a British publisher, helped her publish it in the early 1950s— people were eager for adventure, excitement and new experiences. David conjured just that. She brought cuisines and flavorful recipes from all over the Mediterranean’s to the kitchens of Britain and the West. It revolutionized British cooking, and the way cookery books were written.

Over the years though, the West found itself grappling with a Cold War. With friction on the rise between the two world powers, a war of dominance between the U.S. and Russia consumed the rest of the international community. The Middle East was one of the places where this international stage act was played out. Some countries like Syria, Palestine, and Egypt had supported the Soviet Union and turned to Russia for aid. Such decisions made during this time did not play out well for these countries. As Russia lost the Cold War and pulled out of the region, little to no benefit was gained on the side of the Middle Eastern states. For this, the

²¹ Kadi, J. (1995). *Food for our grandmothers: writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian feminists*. Boston, MA: South End Press. Pg. xix

²² Ibid, xix.

²³ Ibid, xix.

²⁴ Ibid, xix.

tensions between the different sides of the sea seemed to only reinforce the preconceived notions of 'Us' vs 'Them.' It was explained by Joffé, Niblock, and Aliboni. They stated that the political “complexity of the Mediterranean region highlights the obsolescence of the Cold War distinction of 'European' vs 'Middle Eastern' policy concerns, when assessing the security future of the Mediterranean theatre.”²⁵ This orientalist outlook would have still been present, even without the cold war. There aren't collective efforts by authorities and institutions from southern Mediterranean Arab Majority countries to combat this kind of disintegrating attitudes.²⁶ Generally speaking, "the Mediterranean region is increasingly characterized more by its geopolitical heterogeneity than by any strong sense of regional solidarity.”²⁷ This applies to the southern, eastern and northern units. Each faces its own “different set of security dilemmas.”²⁸

So, what does the Mediterranean have that is fixed and unaffected? Clifford A. Wright, author of *A Mediterranean Feast*, demonstrates in his book the Mediterranean in a way no other writer on the Mediterranean has. He deals with its history, influences, and knowledge. To him the Mediterranean has evolved and is always under constant change. Whether it be the political atmosphere, the power dynamics, fiscal and military strength, etc. These things surmount every aspect of the Mediterranean. Everything except for food. According to Wright, the only “constant” of the Mediterranean is the food.²⁹

²⁵ Joffé, G., Niblock, T., & Aliboni, R. (1996). *Security challenges in the Mediterranean region*. London: Frank Cass. (pg. 162).

²⁶ Ibid, 84.

²⁷ Ibid, 162.

²⁸ Ibid, 162.

²⁹ Wright, C.A. (1999). *A Mediterranean feast: story of the birth of the celebrated cuisines of the Mediterranean, from the merchants of Venice to the barbery Corsairs: with more than 500 recipes*. New York: Morrow, pg. 691.

The Concept of Mediterranean Cuisine

There are multiple books on Mediterranean cuisine, but not many explaining what it is and what cuisines it encompasses. There is not much literature either in regards to Mediterranean food culture in America. The only book that goes as far as addressing Mediterranean cuisine from all the borders of the Middle Sea is Wright's *A Mediterranean Feast*. His book not only addresses the food, but also the history and how Mediterranean cuisine came to be what it is today.

On the concept of Mediterranean cuisine Wright states in his book that Mediterranean food isn't "Spanish, French, or Italian food."³⁰ That because of the complexities of the region in terms of its "history, cultures, religions, and geography," has not developed Mediterranean food as "national cuisines based on extreme geography" rather more as "uniquely" different foods that are "intimately related."³¹ According to Wright, Mediterranean cuisine is "composed of many cultures, and there seems to be no single image that represents a "magical" unity. Even with the shared trinity of ingredients (olive oil, wheat, and the vine), Italian is a world apart from Egyptian food, yet both are Mediterranean.³² Commenting further, Wright mentions that Americans will "cook "Mediterranean" food, while a real Mediterranean cook, whether Sicilian, Syrian, or Greek, would never dream of cooking any food but his or her own."³³ This is not the case with Mediterranean restaurants in America. They will serve food distinctly from their home countries, but classify themselves as Mediterranean.

³⁰ Wright, C.A. (1999). *A Mediterranean feast: story of the birth of the celebrated cuisines of the Mediterranean, from the merchants of Venice to the barbary Corsairs: with more than 500 recipes*. New York: Morrow, xvii.

³¹ Ibid, xvii.

³² Ibid, xv.

³³ Ibid, xv.

Wright was willing to answer some questions on the Mediterranean as well as its food culture in America. I was curious as to whether one could compartmentalize the cuisines of the Mediterranean. If it was wise to differentiate between Middle Eastern food and Mediterranean food, or Italian food from Mediterranean food. Wright articulated his thoughts by explaining:

Yes, you almost have to, because the concept “Mediterranean cuisine” is artificial; it’s only a way of seeing and interpreting a phenomenon, similar to the way constellations were created to “see” order in the stars.

A restaurant that serves Levantine cuisine, but calls itself a Mediterranean café is an interesting phenomenon. A question that always came to mind was whether it would have made a difference if it was labeled as a Levantine or Middle Eastern café rather than Mediterranean. I asked Wright if he’s seen this before and why isn’t the Middle East, or any Arab country in the region for that matter, not synonymous with the Mediterranean? He said:

It’s unfortunate that Arab (and Greek) restaurant owners feel the necessity of describing their fare by innocuous terms like “Mediterranean.” This is clearly a result of recent politics and the identification of worldwide terrorism with Muslim and Arab terrorists. It’s not a *bad* thing that they do call it Mediterranean; it’s certainly truthful as Arab food is also Mediterranean food. But what a tall order to convince people that the hummus you will eat in Beirut is Mediterranean food just as is the tapa you will eat in Madrid is also Mediterranean. One of the reasons that people don’t immediately think of “Mediterranean” when you say “hummus,” or for that matter “pizza” both of which are Mediterranean is due to the ignorance concerning what Mediterranean means.

If these kinds of terminologies have an effect on restaurants and Mediterranean food culture in the U.S., then how is the White Sea interpreted from an American perspective?

American Interpretation of Mediterranean

When thinking about the Mediterranean from an American perspective, the first thing that comes to mind are the films *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. Both films portray the Mediterranean as Greece. In the films, Greece was translated either in an American setting or in Greece itself. The Mediterranean is a lively place with an exotic culture and energetic and animated people. They eat different food, speak a different language and have lives different from the idealized American life in films. It's a distant place, but one that anyone would yearn for. A romantic getaway. What's interesting about this kind of image is that most of the regions surround the Middle Sea are never tied to this kind of image. America not only generalizes a place and its people but also compartmentalizes everything in a simplified way.

Generally, from a Western point of view, the northern Mediterranean has a similar mindset as the imperialists. Based on the book, *Light Colour Line* by Dittlback and Sebestyén, southern Mediterranean and the Levant, like other countries out of the West are places to explore, visit, trade or invade.³⁴ The Mediterranean is an “outsized and overwhelming Invitation au Voyage,” and a “visual,” “sensorial invitation to connectivity, a marketplace with balconies all around.”³⁵ This kind of imagery still strongly persists today. Its present not only in films, but also depicted in writings on the Mediterranean.³⁶ “This type of Mediterranean survives until

³⁴ Dittlback, T., & Sebestyén, Á. (2016). *Light Colour Line - Perceiving the Mediterranean: Conflicting Narratives and Ritual Dynamics*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag. Pg.160

³⁵ Ibid, 160.

³⁶ Ibid, 160.

today. This Mediterranean -- a noun instead of a uniquely referring proper noun-- this Mediterranean is part of the West's shared imagination. It represents the Mediterranean Myth.”³⁷

Wright also touches upon this concept in his book. He explains that:

The portrait of a historically bountiful Mediterranean is a false one created by romantically minded food and travel writers who believe that what we see today must have always been. The grandeur of the Mediterranean has held to a conception of a culinarily riche Mediterranean that in reality is a late twentieth-century development based on centuries of evolution.³⁸

The entertainment industry, especially Hollywood, is guilty of exploiting stereotypes to create and reinforce prejudices of the region. Films and books employs orientalism and views other peoples and countries as the “other” whether negatively or positively. Models like this provide inaccurate and simplified visuals of other cultures.

Almost always, the Mediterranean has a hyper romantic image. Even when the Mediterranean is not in great shape due to war, thousands of asylum seekers, and deteriorating economies, that romantic scene isn't hindered. Just like the Middle East, the Mediterranean has a certain cultural model that is enforced and reinforced by the media and film industry to the point where the influence of the term is immediately a romantic one. That is the cultural experience many people, especially Americans, have of the region.

These biases often times find its way into different aspects of the community. Many times, it trickles down and translates into everyday experiences. One example is restaurants and

³⁷ Dittelbach, T., & Sebestyén, Á. (2016). *Light Colour Line - Perceiving the Mediterranean: Conflicting Narratives and Ritual Dynamics*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag. Pg.160

³⁸ Wright, C.A. (1999). *A Mediterranean feast: story of the birth of the celebrated cuisines of the Mediterranean, from the merchants of Venice to the barbary corsairs: with more than 500 recipes*. New York: Morrow. pg xvi

the experiences they provide. In particular, restaurants that offer Mediterranean and/or Middle Eastern cuisines. Labeling a restaurant Mediterranean or Middle Eastern gives it a more exotic vibe, a different feel, perhaps even some kind of authenticity. Some restaurants, interestingly enough, may mark themselves as Mediterranean to downplay the words Middle East or Arab world, which do carry negative influences in today's day and time.

Since the Mediterranean is a broad term encompassing a wide variety of meanings, it can be used in many ways to convey different things in certain contexts as well. Usually, it's used as a term to describe or refer to the region and/or countries surrounding the white sea. It can also be used to refer to the stereotypical American image of far exotic green lands of olives, grape vines, bread, delicious food and romantic culture. There seems to be no consensus on a unified concept befalling under the description of the Mediterranean academically or in popular culture. There are also blurred lines that rise when discussing the contours that define the region. For example, some kind of power structure is evident when using certain terminologies. Stating the Middle East for a westerner clearly points to the regions of north Africa, West Asia including at times Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey. Much of the regions mentioned including North Africa and the Levant are Mediterranean. However, the definition of the word doesn't seem to apply to countries like Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, and Algiers. The stereotypes carried for these places fade out the Mediterranean from its imagery.

Therefore, countries on the southern and eastern shores of the White Sea are seen as Middle Eastern countries rather than Mediterranean. They are portrayed as the orient. In the West, specifically from an American perspective, the Mediterranean is also Orientalized. This perspective is present in novels, film, and pop culture. There is very little research done on Mediterranean cuisine in America. There is also little to no research done intending on showing

and relaying what the everyday ‘westerner’ thinks of the region. The reality of the matter is, that the taxonomy of the Mediterranean is a subtle yet powerful one. It intertwines with other words just as the region itself overlaps other regions. Though unnoticed, it seeps through to the sometimes-simple ways that words are utilized, and entwines with words such as Middle Eastern, Lebanese, Palestinian, Egyptian.

Mediterranean Restaurant: A Cultural Experience

In his book *The Tourist: A New Theory of Leisure Class*, Dean McCannell explains the structure of cultural experiences. McCannell states,

“The data of cultural experiences are somewhat fictionalized, idealized or exaggerated models of social life that are in the public domain, in film, fiction, political rhetoric, small talk, comic strips, expositions, etiquettes and spectacles. All tourist attractions are cultural experiences.”³⁹

There are two basic aspects that make up the cultural experience: Cultural Model and Influences. The cultural model is the representation of an aspect of life on stage, film, etc.⁴⁰ Influence is the changed, created, intensified belief or feeling that is based on the model.⁴¹ The cultural model and influence are connected through an agency called the Medium. The medium is a social situation of face-to-face interaction, a gathering for example is a medium, and so are the radio, television, film and tape.⁴² The media are accomplices in the construction of cultural experiences, but the moral structures of the medium is such that it takes the stance of being

³⁹ MacCannell, D. (1976). *The tourist: A new theory of the leisure class*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pg. 23.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 23.

⁴¹ Ibid, 23.

⁴² Ibid, 24.

neutral or disinterested.⁴³ The medium must appear to be disinterested if it is to be influential, so that any influence that flows from the model can appear to be both spontaneous and based on genuine feelings.⁴⁴

In Lavash café's case, the cultural model could be interpreted as many things. For the sake of example, let's say that the cultural model is everything that customers have heard, seen or learned about the Mediterranean and the Middle East. This means that the media, films, animation, and books model a faraway place. The influence would be that stereotypes, biases, and prejudices appear in the process. The café itself would represent the medium, in which both the influence and the cultural model come together. It's a gathering place where the different kinds of food are present, the display, the pictures on the walls, the large mural of the desert, the vibrant colors, and so on, are all a stage contributing to a cultural experience for diners. Different aspects that represent the Middle East and the Mediterranean come together to create an experience that diners take in. Even the label "A Mediterranean restaurant" is one of the many actors in this theater.

It's interesting to note that not all restaurants serving cousins from the region mark themselves as Mediterranean restaurants. A French restaurant here in the United States is not labeled Mediterranean, rather only a French restaurant. Similarly, Italian restaurants are just simply called Italian restaurants. It can be argued that these restaurants are trying to break away from the Mediterranean stereotype, or the Mediterranean label is simply not necessary for them. It may be because countries that are not viewed by the West as 'other' do not fit in the stereotypical image of Mediterranean countries that are seen as exotic and different. As romantic

⁴³ MacCannell, D. (1976). *The tourist: A new theory of the leisure class*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pg. 24.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 24.

as France is in the media and literature, it is not the exotic, different, inefficient and lazy Mediterranean country that comes to mind. Calling a restaurant French is sufficient.

There are a variety of Mediterranean restaurants here in Columbus, Ohio. Those who provide Middle Eastern cuisines often have a more orientalist atmosphere, feeding into the stereotype of the Middle East and the Mediterranean to make profit. It's obvious many times, with some restaurants using titles like *Aladdin's Eatery*. Other restaurants only have Mediterranean in their title as the label of the restaurant such as *The Olive Tree Mediterranean Café*, and *Mazah Mediterranean Eatery*. Some of these restaurants also sell the Mediterranean and/or Middle Eastern experience through their setting, décor, food and music. Other restaurants, though labeled Mediterranean seem to break away from the stereotypes that come with the label whether it be intentionally or not.

Focusing solely on *Lavash Café*, the restaurant has labeled itself as Mediterranean. Unlike other Mediterranean/Middle Eastern restaurants though, they do not sell the Mediterranean romantic experience or the Middle Eastern orientalist experience. Rather they offer more of a subtle air of culture whilst sticking to a more Western atmosphere, perhaps even reflecting the culture of the area they are in. Regardless of the images on the walls, the murals and the food, it manages to stand uniquely different. With this in mind, how is Lavash café viewed by diners?

In order to learn more, three individuals were asked to share their thoughts on the restaurant. The following chapters will introduce their ethnic backgrounds and what they had to say about Lavash.

Methodology

The purpose of this survey based case study was to gain a better understanding of the Mediterranean and its stereotypes for diners of a local Mediterranean restaurant, Lavash café. The goal was to draw conclusions on what this place might mean to Americans. Conducting a case study based on survey where participants took part in a semi structured interview was an asset to understanding the kind of perspectives Americans have on the Mediterranean. Three participants were interviewed, each for half an hour. The subjects interviewed were asked around 15 questions that will help provide some insight for the objectives of the research. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the data went through thematic analysis and constant comparison. This was done following John W. Creswell's steps on data analysis in qualitative research.⁴⁵ Mostly cookbooks, history books and political science books were utilized for the literature review.

For the purpose of this study, only three subjects were needed to gather sufficient data. Purposive sampling was used to recruit the participants. The individuals needed have the following criteria: They must be adults over the age of eighteen, hold American citizenship, have dined at Lavash café at least once and preferably are ethnically from a country alongside the Mediterranean Sea.

An interview protocol was utilized for the interviews. Each participant was asked the following set of fifteen open ended questions:

- How do you identify as?
- Are you a regular at Lavash café?

⁴⁵ Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

- Have you met the owner? What do you know about him?
- What do you like most about the café and why?
- What do you think makes this café successful?
- What would a Clintonville without Lavash café be like?
- What about Lavash café attracts you as a customer?
- What kind of food does Lavash café serve?
- Lavash café is classified as Mediterranean. What do you think makes it a Mediterranean restaurant?
- What sets it apart from other restaurants that offer similar cuisine?
- What atmosphere do you think Lavash café has created for its customers? Why do you interpret this as such?
- What comes to mind when you hear the word Lavash? Do you know what it means?
- Five words or less what comes to mind when you hear Mediterranean? Middle Eastern? Arab? Arab American?
- Would there be a difference if the restaurant was classified as a Middle Eastern or Arab restaurant?
- In your view, what kind of experience does Lavash want to offer for its customers?

The interviews were more free flowing and did not stick rigidly to the questions listed. If the participant said something interesting, I would digress from the main line of questioning to get more clarification before asking the next.

The data was collected from the interviews through a recorder and was later transcribed for analysis. Participants signed a consent form prior to the commencement of the interview. They were aware that their names will not be disclosed, only their ethnicity. They only needed to be

involved during the interview. The duration of the interviews took no more than thirty minutes. Follow-up emails were sent to all participants to confirm and member check direct statements for quotations. Participants were able to leave at any point in time during the interview, and if they chose to do so they would not be penalized nor lose their benefits, a discount on their next Lavash café meal.

It's important to note that there are some short comings with this research. This study cannot fully grasp what the Mediterranean really is for the American. It will only reveal what it may be for a select few. Also, it is worth mentioning that out of chance all three of the participants had some form familiarity, knowledge, experience and background in the Middle East. They don't identify as Arab, but they all spoke the Arabic language. Therefore, their perspectives aren't a reflection of what the general American perceives of the region. This study also doesn't tap into the cultural aspect of the Mediterranean as portrayed in films, books, and media. Lastly, many perspectives are left out due to the small sample size of participants as well as the analysis of one restaurant in one of the many populated cities in America. The Mediterranean may also mean something different to someone from the region, or to someone from Asia, or Africa, or Central Asia. Nevertheless, this is a starting point. This research will contribute to food studies which doesn't have literature on this topic. Hopefully, it will open the doors for more discussion and analysis in this field.

Chapter 2: “Lavash Feels like a Community”

Malaysian American

The first participant in the study was a Malaysian American. I met her at Lavash café, we sat in the expanded section of the restaurant that has a giant mural spanning three walls on the desert and of an unknown Arabian city and oasis. There were everyday people and caravan camels painted throughout the mural as well. She had prior experience in both the Mediterranean and the Middle East and is fluent in the Arabic language. She is a lecturer at The Ohio State University, which is not far from the restaurant. She is somewhat of a regular at Lavash café, dining there either once a month or on Thursdays because they offer maqluba— an Arab/Levantine dish consisting of rice meat or chicken as well as fried vegetables like tomatoes, potatoes, cauliflowers, carrots and eggplant— as their special every week on Thursdays.

She has not met the owner of the restaurant, but knows that he is of Arab descent and has heard her students talking about him. When asked if she has heard of him from the community or just her students, she explained that it was just her students. Adding to that she joked that there was an Arab discount that she found out about recently. I asked what she like most about the café and why. She said it was the “setting, the layout, the wooden floor.” She did not know there was a second side to the restaurant. The smaller area that is often used by clientele was a tighter space, louder and busier. The larger section with the mural was “nice” and a “bit more family friendly.” In her opinion what made the café successful was the food special they offered during the week. She explained that the food specials were “more authentic” and although her Middle Eastern students complain about the food; she does like it. Agreeing with them she said if “someone brings a Malaysian dish in front of me, I would probably criticize it” in one way or another because she is “more familiar with it.”

There's always been a question of authentic food. I asked her if she calls the food at Lavash authentic because of her experiences in the Middle East. She agreed, stating that she lived in Jordan and Cairo for a year. So, based on her experiences, the Maqluba offered at the restaurant is "pretty good." She was just disappointed that one doesn't get the full experience of the dish in, "you don't the upside-down rice here, for that I'm disappointed." In other words, what the Arabic 'maqluba' signifies (flipped/upside down). She continues, "Otherwise the maqluba is decent" adding that they also mansaf, another meat/rice dish usually served on top of bread, all soaked with yogurt creamy sauce special to the Levant region, especially Jordan as it is its national dish. The participant has eaten this dish in Palestinian/Jordanian households abroad, so she is familiar with it. She laughs saying that it puts her into "food coma" so she doesn't usually eat it. She doesn't know what the specials are for the other days because "it is pricey," so she can only afford to go every once in a while.

When asked, what would a Clintonville without Lavash café look like she replied that she feels "welcomed" because she tends to see the owner. "Maybe not every visit, but you do feel his presence. It does feel a bit more like a community." Continuing, she contrasted it to Aladdin's Eatery. She said that she has not met the owner there before and finds that she tends to go to place where it feels a bit more like a community. Also, noting that Lavash has a diverse clientele. She's not sure how diverse it is at Aladdin's, but noticed that there aren't many Arabs who frequent it as they do Lavash.

Was it the place or food that she finds more people gravitating to one over the other? She replied that Aladdin's does not have a rotating menu that more like what she thinks of Arab food. Stating that, "Of course Aladdin has kababs, but I don't remember if I saw any dish that reminds me of my time in Egypt or Jordan. Its more Mediterranean than it is Arab food." Immediately, I

asked what she meant by Mediterranean. Clarifying, she said that its more similar to what she would find in an Italian restaurant, “I’ve also lived in southern France. Food in Aladdin’s reminds me a lot of the food I’ve encountered there so it doesn’t really evoke anything for me.”

What kind of food does Lavash serve? To her it was similar to Aladdin’s, the only difference are the rotating dishes that one would find in a family home in Jordan on a weekly basis. To her, that’s what makes Lavash “more special.” I asked her what she meant by this. She explained that they were both similar in terms of regular their menus. They both have kababs, gyro sandwiched, baba ghanoush, etc. Lavash’s daily specials are what attracts her more than the regular menu.

It was interesting that although Aladdin’s serves what she would call as Mediterranean, yet labels itself in an orientalist way. Whereas Lavash serves both her definition of Mediterranean and Arab food yet labels itself differently. Lavash café also classifies itself as Mediterranean. I wanted to know what she made of this and what makes Lavash a Mediterranean restaurant. My Malaysian participant replied:

I guess when I’m thinking about the Mediterranean I’m thinking more about Southern Europe. I notice a lot of Arab restaurants label themselves Mediterranean. I wonder whether it’s to try not to scare people. They have the same kinds of foods and menus. I think when Americans think Mediterranean they do think about south Europe, like southern France or southern Italy, there’s not a lot of sauces in the food— more like the grilled meat and rice.

To this I asked if she wouldn’t see Lavash as a Mediterranean restaurant. She referred back to the separate daily menus saying that it adds a “little bit extra” and if it didn’t have it, then maybe Lavash serves Mediterranean food. A lot of Mediterranean restaurants have baklava at the very

least, and Lavash has some western cakes as well so if she didn't see the separate menu, she would have thought that it was another Mediterranean restaurant.

The word Lavash is intriguing. I wondered if she knew what it meant. She has been wondering for a long time on this as well as another restaurant called Sababa a Mediterranean Grill. Though she knew Arabic, she could not figure out what they meant.

When I hear Lavash I think about the French word for cow and think to myself, there is a lot of grilled meat. That's what I thought the first time I came here. Of course, it's not spelled correctly, in French it's spelled "La vache," but they sound the same. So, I don't know whether it's like a play on words (la vache) or it could be a family name (Lavash).

Afterward, I gave her four words separately in attempt to learn more about her perspective through free association. In five words or less she should tell me what comes to mind when she hears these words. The first being the Mediterranean. Her answer was "Warmth, healthier food, France, Italy, even Lebanon." Second, Middle East. "It depends on where you're going to start." She asked if Middle East incorporates the near east. That the Middle East would probably mean more of the Gulf area/peninsula, referring to "Syria Lebanon Saudi, Kuwait" (excluding North Africa). The third term was Arab. "Arab countries," adding again the peninsula, and "countries that have a majority Arab population or speak Arabic" as one of their official languages. The last term was Arab American. "These are people who came from these majority Arabic speaking countries."

Following up with the previous question, I asked her if there would be a difference if Lavash café classified itself as Middle Eastern. As she mentioned before, she thinks it would scare Americans and because of this many Arab restaurants label themselves as Mediterranean,

“I think its conscious choice to be more inviting.” Adding that if they were to change it to “an Arab Restaurant” many Americans would unfortunately “stay away.” Of course, I wanted to know if this was a viable reason for restaurants to label themselves as such. Would they still classify under the definition of Mediterranean? She was clear that this would depend on the country. She wouldn’t call Saudi Arabia a Mediterranean country. It depends on the owner’s background. I wondered if the food that’s being presented would play a role in the label. She said that the food at Lavash is from Jordan. If they have access to the Mediterranean then its fine, “but if the food is from Kuwait, no.”

Lastly, I wanted to know what kind of experience Lavash wants to offer to its customers. “I think they do try to be inviting” continuing that when walking to the restaurant one would hear many different languages, “you are meeting a community.” She explains further that if the classification changes some people might “miss a lot by not deciding to come.” If Lavash was labeled as an Arab restaurant, her father in law would not even walk in regardless of how much she’s tried to talk to him about the culture.

To her Lavash feels like a community. The food they serve is the same food she would eat with her Arab friends and their families. Sometimes she would just go to Lavash to get hummus, appetizers and tea and just listen to people speaking in Arabic. She says that she sometimes just misses the atmosphere, and this experience, she doesn’t quite get it in other restaurants.

Chapter 3: “The Food, only the Food”

Bulgarian American

The second participant identifies as Bulgarian American. She explained that she’s a “combination of Eastern European, slightly Mediterranean and United States.” Like the first participant, she is a regular at Lavash café. She has not met the owner and does not know anything about him. She likes Arab food in general and Lavash café is one of the places in Columbus that she can get Arab food that is “reliably prepared” and that she can trust there will be no “foodborne illnesses” so she could feed it to her children.

She also likes the setting. To her it’s “very conducive to slow nice lunches and dinners.” For clarification, I asked what she meant by Arab food. She explained that she liked Arabic food in general and by that she means Arab food “Traditional to the Shami region” (Sham is Arabic for Levant). In other words, hummus, yalangi, warak enab, tabbouleh, falafel, shorbet adas, baklava, etc. that are all “typical to that region specifically.” This was the kind of cuisine she was exposed to when she first went to the Arab world. because of her experience, that’s what she thinks of when she refers to Arab food, and that’s what she looks for when she goes to a restaurant serving Arab cuisine.

Would she choose Lavash café over other restaurants that serve Arab food? She said that she can’t say whether or not she could. Even though there are many in Columbus, she had only been to two reliable restaurants. Between the two, Lavash café and Pita Hut, Lavash is the better option. To her, what makes it successful is the food. All of its clientele are there for the food. The people of Arab or Middle Eastern origin are there for the food because “people tend to look for the food that they grow up with.” Other non-Arab customers of Lavash, “other people,” in Columbus are “generally interested in food that is related to other cultures.” Cuisines that are not

traditional to American or Western European cuisines. When I asked what she meant by “other people,” she said people “of non-Mediterranean or non-Middle Eastern origin. So, the Germans of Columbus and the Italians of Columbus.”

So, as a customer of Lavash, I wanted to know what attracted her to the place. Her answer was simple, “The food, only the food.” Delving more into detail on the kind of food served, she called it, “popular American interpretation of Middle Eastern food.” This of course includes the “typical offering” of appetizers, salads, meat kababs, etc.

I am saying popular American because many of these would not be offered necessarily in the same form in the Middle East in my experience, and they’re typically prepared in a way that is more aligned with local understanding of what good food is. So, for example the meat, if you just order it without specifying anything it will be always overcooked because the local understanding of cooked meat is that it has to be over cooked. You actually have to talk to the cook if you want your meat to be normal. This is the kind of food that they serve.

I mentioned that Lavash is classified as Mediterranean, and asked what she makes of this classification. She thought this was an interesting label because the Mediterranean “encompasses everything from Spain to Syria.”

That is a lot of very different culinary traditions. I mean the difference between Spain, Greece, Turkey, Syria, the North African countries, this is all Mediterranean and they’re all completely different. So, I would not classify Lavash as Mediterranean, I would classify it as Middle Eastern part of the Mediterranean.

I asked if she thought there were any issues with this kind of label. “I don’t think so.” This kind of label was in a way “easier for people who are not of Middle Eastern origin to understand.” It

was a more “neutral” label, especially because of the political climate where Middle Eastern traditions are not “necessarily acceptable.” So, calling it a Mediterranean restaurant is somewhat true and “more neutral.”

Then what would set it apart from other restaurants that offer similar cuisines? Immediately she remembered another restaurant in Columbus, Mezeh Mediterranean Grill. Her impression of what sets Lavash apart is the fact that Lavash “offers good food and Mezeh doesn’t.” She does not like the food presented by Mezeh, but believes they are “popular enough,” because she doesn’t think that the public in Columbus that is not of Middle Eastern origin is “that discerning.” Curious as to whether she dined at other Mediterranean restaurants (i.e. that are not serving Middle Eastern cuisine), I asked if she had been to any. Surprisingly, she has only seen the label Mediterranean applied only to Middle Eastern restaurants. In her words, Greek restaurants don’t label themselves as Mediterranean, just Greek. Also, “Italians don’t advertise themselves as Mediterranean, even though they are Mediterranean, they say they’re Italians.” This is how she distinguishes the restaurants. If she’s thinking of Mediterranean as a label, she technically does not know of other Mediterranean restaurants in Columbus to compare Lavash to.

In regards to atmosphere, what has Lavash created for its customers? The participant couldn’t speak to all customers. She explained that this is because different customers will “interpret the ambience in different kinds of ways.” For her personally, the atmosphere is very Middle Eastern. This is in fact due to her traveling experiences abroad in the region. Specifying that its “interpreted through local limitations of what you can actually have in the restaurant and again I would not interpret it as Mediterranean. To me it’s strictly Middle Eastern.”

Just as the previous participant, I conducted a free association questionnaire with her. The words were the same as before. When she hears the term Mediterranean she thinks of Greece. This is because she has been to the Mediterranean and the first place she visited was Greece. So, to her Mediterranean is the “blue sea with white little stone houses.” She seemed to associate most of her views with her experiences. I reminded her that she has stated at the beginning of the interview that what encompasses the Mediterranean is a lot more than that. She agreed, explaining that Greece is the first thing that comes to mind, and then her perception expands to the rest of the countries along sea.

In terms with the Middle East, the first thing that comes to mind for her is Syria. Even though she mentions that her first experience of the Middle East was her travel to Turkey, Syria stood out more. “The first time that I actually went on my own and spent a prolonged period of time in was Syria.” She agreed that everything is tied to her experiences. When asked about Arab, again she mentioned Syria for the same reasons. She thought of Damascus, Barada, and the market. Most of the things that come to mind for her when she thinks Arab are “images and not words.” When she hears Arab American, the first thing that comes to mind are her students. She realized that she does not have “any general concept of Arab American” or an “organized concept” of what it is. She just thinks of several people she knows who are Arab American.

So, would there be a difference if the restaurant was classified as Middle Eastern or Arab? She responded that it wouldn't make a difference for her, rather she thinks it would actually be a more “precise label” for them. “Probably not Arab, but Middle Eastern specifically.” I added perhaps Lavant or Palestinian cuisine, she replied that its “always tricky because a lot of countries claim ownership of the food that is understood to be Middle Eastern.” One can easily and “equally successfully” call this kind of restaurant “Turkish, Lebanese, Syrian,

Palestinian, or Jordanian for that matter. Even Egyptians would argue that a lot of the food that they offer is Egyptian, even though they don't offer Kushari for example" (kushari is an Egyptian dish consisted of macaroni, rice, fried onions, chickpeas, lentils, and sauce). There wouldn't be much of a difference for Lavash café if the classification changed.

Lastly, I asked her what kind of experience does Lavash want to offer for its customers. She does not know, but says:

If I have to speculate, I think that they want to offer the positive side of the restaurant experience in the Middle East, which is being comfortable, not feeling rushed and the whole ambiance actually works for that because you have comfortable tables and comfortable chairs and they're usually very large tables so they're just inviting for people to sit and to stay there as opposed to traditional American and even Western European which are made small and not too comfortable because you are not supposed to spend a lot time eating, you're supposed to go through this quickly. So, this is my impression, and again that's a complete conjecture because I have no idea what they might be thinking.

That even places in America that are non-fast-food have tables and chairs that are smaller. "You're not supposed to have a huge company." Going out to eat either lunch or dinner is usually done "individually and as quickly as possible." This is because in the States, eating is not seen as "communal" in the American culture.

Chapter 4: “It’s not Mediterranean Folks”

White American

The third and last participants identifies as White American. He has one only one citizenship, his parents were born in the United States and he has not lived abroad for periods longer than a year. Unlike the first two participants, he is not a regular at Lavash café. He has not met the owner, but hears that the place is run by either Palestinians or Jordanians. When he saw that they were serving mansef, he thought Jordanian.

For him the restaurant is expensive. He has tried the moussaka before and liked that is was “well prepared and not greasy” (moussaka is a Levant/Middle Eastern dish comprised of eggplant, meat, cream sauce and tomatoes, and has different regional variations). If he were to have “unlimited funds,” he would dine there because “its Middle Eastern food that’s fresh and homemade and that’s not just falafel and hummus. I like that they have real dishes and they have specialties that are more Homestyle food.” He has had experience eating in many Middle Eastern restaurants. Most of them had a limited menu with the typical offerings of hummus, falafel, kababs, etc. He appreciates it when there is a broader menu though. Based on his experience, there are few places that offered broader quality meals, they were in different cities like Boston and Queens. Other than Lavash, he was not aware of any other places that serves more Homestyle dishes. He has only been to Lavash and the Yemeni restaurant off of Cleveland Ave. Even though the Yemeni restaurant was quite a drive from the Ohio State campus, it was “worth the trip.” The food was “very good, as I expected it to be.” These two are the only Middle Eastern restaurants he’s been to in Columbus because he does not like the food. He’s seen other places like Aladdin’s Eatery, but hasn’t dined there on the assumption that is was not going to be good.

I asked if it was because of the label. He agreed saying that there was an Aladdin's in the city he used to live in, New Haven Connecticut. It was a late-night place that served greasy food like burgers and pizza. To him it sounded less authentic, and lower end. He explained that that's in part because it was open until 4:00am and what it served was "mediocre," and the "stereotypical college town falafel place." They wouldn't have lamb dishes, specials, or mansef like Lavash. He had asked a professor about Aladdin's Eatery here in Columbus, and the professor said it was okay, but not as good as Lavash.

In terms of what makes Lavash successful, he says that it might be the location and the food. His perception is that their food is fresh and they put their meat on display. Also, because their meat is halal meat it does not limit the demographic of their clientele. He mentioned an expensive Lebanese bistro in Nashville called *L' Epice* (the spice) that would serve non-halal meat. That he notices when these places get "fancier" they would opt less for halal. There were Muslims families who dined there, but they tended to be Arabs than South Asians. South Asians were stricter and would only eat kosher meat or *zabiha* (the halal method of slaughtering an animal). "It's not interested in being a place that's halal in any sense. I remember thinking like really? You're not going to have halal chicken? In a place serving Lebanese food you're going to exclude anyone who cares." I asked him perhaps the owners may be Lebanese Christians. He agreed that they probably are, but mentioned that where he grew up there was a "halal market that run by Christians because it's an Arab market to, they have halal meat." The owner wasn't Muslim, but "all of his meat is *zabiha* because that's his clientele."

What attracted him to Lavash as a customer was the food. There was a wide variety of fresh dishes. "There's a whole variety, if somebody wants fish there's fish, if you don't want lamb there's chicken." It's more like a "full-service restaurant" to him than what he thinks the

“stereotypical Middle Eastern place” is, which is more like the “fast food Middle Eastern” kind of place.

When I asked him about Lavash café’s classification as Mediterranean, he laughed replying, “I bet they are.”

I think what makes it a Mediterranean restaurant is that it’s a euphemism. I think that Persian restaurants, Israeli restaurants call themselves Mediterranean. I think that Iranian restaurants call themselves Mediterranean because nobody is offended. In New York, you’d find five places named Mediterranean food and they serve all this Iranian food. It’s like it’s not Mediterranean folks. Yes, so I think that’s a bit of a euphemism. First of all, the Middle East has all these bad connotations to many people. Mediterranean doesn’t. Mediterranean diet is supposed to be this healthy thing. Nobody talks about the Arab diet. You think of Mediterranean food as being this wonderful thing. People are comfortable with Greek food, and Italian food. It kind of brings the restaurants into that group of cuisines rather than saying that area you hear in the news. So, I think that’s a marketing thing. I mean its accurate to some extent.

He would say that Lavash café serves Middle Eastern food. Adding that they do serve some North African specials. He might have seen the famous Moroccan dish tajine as one of their specials. He said that they did have moussaka as well which is “Turkish, but the fact that they have mansef, it’s pretty Arab.”

What sets it apart from other restaurants that offer the same cuisine is they quality, variety and price. “In Jordan I used to spend a dollar and have lunch and it was lovely and not even that it was delicious so when I came here I’m like six dollars for this?” Putting aside price,

he thinks that the food is good at Lavash. When there are events on campus that are catered by Lavash, he would more than likely attend. “I don’t necessarily spend my money there, but if somebody tells me Lavash is catering an event, I’m much more likely to go to the event than if they don’t tell me or its somewhere else.”

When I asked him, what atmosphere has Lavash created for its customers, he replied similarly to the other two participants.

It’s not extremely formal, it’s sort of like, you go up to the counter and order. You sit down and there’s families. I don’t know, I just find it comfortable. It’s certainly nice, and not like a fast food place. Its nicer than a fast food place but also less formal than say *L’Epice* or somewhere where you sit down and the waiter comes to you. So, in some ways I think its bridging that gap between a full-service restaurant and a place where you go up to the counter and order fries and shawarma.

It’s a more of a “relaxed,” family atmosphere. He has seen families dining there and what seemed to be the owner going around greeting the regular customers in Arabic.

I asked him what came to mind when he heard the word Lavash and if he knew what it meant. He said her knew it meant bread but was now sure if it was an Arabic word or not. It didn’t strike him as an Arabic word, “Maybe Mediterranean, is it Greek?” Lavash is a Turkic word, special to the regions bordering the Levant like Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Persia. It was interesting that it sounded Mediterranean to him. I explained that others said it sounded French. He agreed that it does sound a little French, but you categorize it with Pita. “It’s a word that has somehow become popular. If you went to Trader Joes, they’d probably be selling Lavash bread. They’d use that word, or they’d use Pita.” When he went to Lavash, he realized that it wasn’t an

Arabic term and wondered why it couldn't be called is "khubz" (Arabic for bread), "mahkbaz" (bakery), or "khabbaz" (baker).

Afterwards, I asked what came to mind when he heard the four terms I had previously presented to the other two participants. In five words or less he thought of "Sunlight, Olives, Tomatoes" when he heard Mediterranean. With Middle East, it was "War, poverty, disaster." Arab was "Pride, disorganization," and Arab American was "Challenge, first generation, diaspora." When I asked if there would be a difference if the restaurant classified itself as Middle Eastern or Arab he replied immediately that it would "harm their business" and would "probably restrict clientele." Stating just like the Malaysian American participant that some people would not go who would normally go to Mediterranean restaurant and people who are "Arab or interested in Arab food" know that the restaurant "basically serves it so they'll go there anyway." He thinks that "calling it a Mediterranean restaurant expands your clientele."

Finally, I asked him for his views on what kind of experience Lavash wants to offer to its customers. To him it was a "mixture of what's comfortable and what's exotic." He continued, stating that when he was there he asked an employee to tell him what mansef was just so he could hear what they had to say. He explained that they assume that the average person has never heard of the dishes they are offering, but explain to customers that it isn't "weird" and will be "exciting" to have. That somehow the dishes are "Americanized" or there's "less spice."

My sense is that it's somewhat adapted for the Ohio clientele. I remember this place called Café Beruit in Boston. They had an English menu and an Arabic menu. I looked at the Arabic menu and it had like kidneys, kibbeh nayyeh on it and it wasn't on the English. I think partly because many Americans would just be freaked out. You're serving like Lebanese steak tartar; this is getting into territory that I don't

think Lavash would want to get anywhere near. The kind of stuff that a lot of Americans would not be comfortable with. They're not going to be like, here's raw meat, or here's kidneys, or here's the head. When they serve the mansaf, they're not going to give you the head. So, I think they're trying to be in the middle of the road to some extent while remaining authentic.

He explained that this was a challenge to balance because Lavash café has two sets of clients. On the one hand, there are the Arabs, Arab Americans, and people with Middle Eastern roots and on the other are everyone else who Lavash café may be one of the few experiences they've had of the region, food and culture.

One of the first questions I've had when I started the research was how the layout of the place played in with the kind of experience Lavash wanted to provide for their diners. In other places, such as Aladdin's Eatery, the layout is exoticized. As if your walking into an orientalist scene of the Middle East. Was that the same kind of experience Lavash presents? He commented that there is a subtlety to it in Lavash. It's a middle/upper-class restaurant that puts on display on their walls what "feels" like perhaps a more "generically Mediterranean" rather than anything political or controversial. Also, noting for the same reason, they serve tajine and moussaka. One is Turkish and the other Moroccan. The use of the classification of Mediterranean expands what they have to offer. "Maybe the core is Arab or Levantine" with Turkey on one side of the Levant and Morocco on the other. "It's kind of interesting." One of the things he experienced with more of the fast-food Arab places in the North East was that they tended to have Italian food.

"Aladdin's had pizza. They make pizza, they make Stromboli, they make calzones, they'll make you pasta, it's just another thing they do." He also noted that in New Haven "many of the pizzerias are run by Egyptians. It's really interesting."

Continuing, he discussed how Egyptians have their own style of pizza called *feteer*. He remembers that it was salty. He had asked an Egyptian man running a pizzeria in New Haven why he would make some of it and the man replied, “nobody would eat it.” That he had recently came to America and “realized that there was money in making pizza so he learned how to make pizza. He makes Italian/American style pizza with no Egyptian dishes on his menu.”

A lot of the fast-food restaurants that he had dealt with were places that were open until late at night and served greasy food. The food was “okay” and “inexpensive.” However, “Lavash is not like that,” because “they charge prices that are a lot higher so they have to be different.”

Conclusion: Lavash café

The Mediterranean in America is a concept that is yet to be discussed as part of American food culture. This is perhaps the first attempt to delve into the topic and to try to understand how the Mediterranean and its complexities are interpreted and understood from a place hundreds and miles away. It's a difficult task to undertake, because the Mediterranean is always undergoing constant change and defining it is a challenge. An interesting statement by Thomas Dittelbach in his book *Light Colour Line-Perceiving the Mediterranean: Conflicting Narratives and Ritual Dynamics*, "Seeking to define the Mediterranean is, seems rather like the Labour of Hercules in slaying the many-headed Hydra: each new question, every new aspect gives rise to another one."⁴⁶

The Mediterranean is also a place that bridges three continents together. A place with rich history that intertwines the regions bordering it. Regardless of the region's unity and divisions along the lines of politics, geography and economy, it will always remain as a place of dichotomy so long as the inherent orientalist outlook of the southern and eastern regions remain prevalent in the West. America especially, throughout history has always opted out for a simplistic view the "other." Each significant time period rendered a scapegoat in which collective fear and hatred was spewed against. The baggage often times finds its way to the world of cuisine. This may be an important reason as to why many restaurants serving regional Middle Eastern food choose to label themselves as 'Mediterranean.' Thus, 'Mediterranean cuisine' is concocted not only as a vague way to refer to the region's food as a whole, but also somehow came to selectively epitomize cuisine of Western European countries, Greece and

⁴⁶ Dittelbach, T., & Sebestyén, Á. (2016). *Light Colour Line - Perceiving the Mediterranean: Conflicting Narratives and Ritual Dynamics*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag. Preface.

surrounding islands in American pop culture. There seems to be little to no room for Arab and African Mediterranean cuisine in this image. Thus, this thesis was set out to better understand how deeply prevalent this paradigm is in the minds of Americans. To somewhat conceptualize and visualize what the ‘Mediterranean’ really is like for them. Focusing primarily on Columbus’s Lavash Café and its clientele, in-depth interviews were conducted in hopes to form a solid picture of where Arab cuisine fits into the American image of the ‘Middle Sea.’

Due to chance, all the Participants interviewed are fluent in the Arabic Language, have knowledge and expertise on the Middle East and were exposed to its people, food and culture. Nevertheless, certain conclusions and reoccurring themes were formed throughout the interview process. The subjects all agreed that Lavash café has a family friendly environment, one that is not rushed and somehow reflective of the region. Its welcoming to big parties and feels like a community. The food served there is more authentic than most of the Middle Eastern restaurants they’ve been to. It reminds them of their past experiences in the region. They appreciated the specials and for two of them, it’s what won them over. It’s the idea of the “Homestyle” cooked meals that are fresh and reminiscent of their travels to the Arab World. The food is what one would find in an Arab household though it is somewhat Americanized to cater for a broader group of clientele. Because Americans that are of non-Middle Eastern Heritage are not familiar with Arab cuisine, they feel as though this kind of atmosphere really works in favor of the restaurant.

Concerning the Mediterranean image, all the participants had similar views. Nowhere in their perception did the Levant and North Africa fit into their narrative of the Mediterranean. The second participant mentioned that the area does encompass a very broad space that spans from one side of the sea to the other, but the first thing that came to mind for her when thinking of the

Mediterranean was Greece. It's interesting to note that when she was asked what she thought of when she heard Arab, she mentioned the marketplace. A comment similar to Dittelbach's, the Mediterranean being a "marketplace with balconies all around."⁴⁷ With this, another head rises in the "many-headed Hydra." Are there similar images that come to mind when thinking of the Middle East and the Mediterranean? Are the similarities pushed to the back of our minds? Is there never a conscious connection?

The last participant seemed to see a connection with the label. He explained that perhaps classifying the restaurant Mediterranean expands what Lavash café has to offer. Not only is Levantine/Arab cuisine is served, but the doors open for their Turkish and Moroccan dishes. Both the first and the last participants agreed that changing this classification to Middle Eastern would affect the restaurant's business negatively. A more accurate label like the 'Middle East' or 'Arab' would "restrict their clientele" and Americans who would go to a 'Mediterranean' restaurant which serves the same food won't step foot into a 'Middle Eastern' one. The label 'Mediterranean' expands their clientele and may be, among other things, is a significant factor to their success.

The label itself does not suffice for whether or not there is a connection between the Mediterranean and the Middle East for Americans. It seems that generally speaking, Americans don't tie the two regions together. Someone who would walk straight into a Mediterranean restaurant but consciously decide not to come close to a Middle Eastern restaurant proves that theory. Consequently, the Mediterranean and the Middle East are two separate entities, seemingly unattached with no similarities. Perhaps the political climate has overridden basic

⁴⁷ Dittelbach, T., & Sebestyén, Á. (2016). *Light Colour Line - Perceiving the Mediterranean: Conflicting Narratives and Ritual Dynamics*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag. Pg.160

geography. Though one can argue that schools generally don't teach American students much about the world, the idea of the Mediterranean as a region wholly incorporating all its sides, peoples, and attributes isn't ever examined. That brings me to the question of how this dilemma can be solved, or at the very least eased. When asked to comment on what the Mediterranean should be for Americans and how to alleviate some the generalized misconceptions of this place, Wright stated:

Although it would probably be hard for many people, traveling to the Mediterranean is one of the best educations except that for many it's going to the trees without seeing the forest. However, after numerous visits one can get a perspective. Second, there's nothing like reading, either books about the Mediterranean a book about specific regional Mediterranean cuisines, which is another way of saying Greek cookbooks, Sicilian cookbooks, Arab cookbooks etc.

This may be a start to hopefully expanding discourses on the Mediterranean and the Middle East as well Mediterranean food culture in America.

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