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***¡HAY COMIDA EN LA CASA!* – THERE IS FOOD AT HOME!**

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Environmental Analysis Program

in partial fulfillment of Bachelor of Arts

Pomona College

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December 2023

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Chapter I: Introduction

On weekdays, Chef Lucy Silva ends her day job as a food deliverer for local elementary schools and heads straight to the grocery store to buy the ingredients that she will transform into meals for dozens of families around Corona, California, including her own. Depending on the day, she may decide to host a laid-back coffee night, or serve her fan-favorite enchiladas. Customers stay updated on her menu of the day through notifications on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. It is her restaurant, *her house*, and her rules—she chooses exactly what will be served at Barra de Pan.

Chef Lucy is one of many emerging chefs and home cooks across California who are transforming their kitchens and backyards into restaurants. Over the pandemic, there was a surge in home restaurants known formally as “microenterprise home kitchen operations” (MEHKOs). Startups opened as platforms to feature these MEHKOs, with the most notable example being the Bay Area-based website Foodnome. People had been selling food on Facebook and in group chats even before COVID-19. However, 2019 represented a significant shift when the statewide bill AB-626 was passed. AB-626 created a permit system that allowed people to designate their home businesses as MEHKOs and sell restaurant-quality food out of their kitchens. This law opened the door for many chefs and home cooks, of various backgrounds, to prepare food for their local communities. The history of each cook was different—some came restaurant-trained and some had never stepped foot in a formal kitchen—but each had in common a dream to prepare cuisines that shared their heritage with their neighborhood. Because many of the chefs who run MEHKOs are first and second-generation immigrants, this practice of making and sharing food from their home countries occurs while being distant from them. As Amelia Nierenberg who writes for The New York Times, said about MEHKO cooks: this offers a way to say, through food: “This is my history. This is who I am.” (Nierenberg, 2020)

Along with expressing their identities through food, cooks also have to navigate the complicated landscape of entrepreneurship and the food industry. State regulations on home-cooked food prevent these restaurants from simply existing. As I am writing this paper, all states permit the sale of non-hazardous foods, which are foods less likely to cause food-borne illnesses. They require that home cooks undergo inspection and that they operate with a permit. In this thesis, I focus on California, which is among the few states to have implemented a policy (AB-626) allowing the sale of full meals and hosting guests in private homes. The policy mandates that counties opt-in and currently only ten counties are participating. Cooks bear the burden of navigating these laws, a task which is more difficult for some if they are immigrants and are unfamiliar with certain processes.

I had the privilege of interviewing the owners of two MEHKOs, Guido Totaro and Lucy Silva, and asking them about their experience with their new businesses. Using my interviews with them and the stories from other home chefs, I sought to answer: what is a MEHKO, what do they serve, whom do they serve, and what do they represent? With these guiding questions, I will explore how home cooks have responded to policies regulating home-cooked food. Additionally, I will look at how transforming one's home into a restaurant influences the kind of food they serve. I am most interested in how this seemingly small policy has brought neighbors to each other's doorsteps and backyards to share stories about food and home. What compelled chefs to choose their homes as a site for a restaurant?

I begin, in Chapter II, with the development of homemade food policy in the United States. The first set of laws permitting home-cooked foods are known as cottage food laws. These laws are found in every state, and they allow people to sell low-risk foods such as baked goods. I show that cottage food laws have been beneficial to low-income rural women specifically as they allow

them to make use of leftover produce from their farm and to sell them at farmers' markets. However, these laws are not helpful everywhere as they do not apply to people in urban areas who have a variety of culinary skills unrelated to farm produce. Additionally, an incident happened in the Bay Area, CA, where a home cook startup named Josephine closed for not complying with health regulations. This resulted in home food advocacy groups forming to push for an expansion of homemade food policy in California. While homemade food policy is still very much in its infancy, Chapter II charts the course of its legitimization and the groups that helped to push it through.

In Chapter III, I put names to faces in this story, turning to Guido Totaro, a MEHKO owner from Corona, CA. He explains how AB-626 allowed him to start his dream of opening a restaurant. Guido immigrated from Argentina in 2014 and expressed to me how he did not know how to navigate business ownership in the U.S. Over the COVID-19 pandemic, Guido signed up for an entrepreneurship course for Hispanics by the City of Corona named *Emprendor@s*. I argue that the implementation of policy alone is not enough to start business ownership; it must come along with community support. Speaking of community, both local and international, I shift to a discussion of Guido's cuisine which he describes as traditionally Argentine. This is what makes MEHKOs different: they are malleable enough to be shaped by the memories of one's home country chefs left behind, which are in turn shared with others to serve to them a new cultural cuisine. Argentine and Non-Argentine Southern Californians alike can experience Guido's cuisine as a source of familiarity or cultural exploration, underscoring the importance of community in MEHKOs in both the policy and culture context.

In Chapter IV, I interview Lucy Silva who emphasizes authenticity in her cuisine. Lucy was born in Tijuana, Mexico, but grew up in Southern California. She has experience in the

restaurant industry, but that has steered her away from wanting to open a brick-and-mortar space. She prefers operating her home restaurant from her backyard because it avoids the headaches and financial stresses of traditional establishments. Moreover, Lucy cherishes the opportunity to be more intentional with the cooking process so that she can ensure a quality meal. Quality, to Lucy, is tied to the authenticity of the Mexican recipes that she gathered through travels and from her memories of family cuisine. Lucy emphasizes the dining experience in her restaurant; her goal is to make her customers feel at home. Building on my interview with her, I conclude that MEHKOs allow chefs more flexibility and creative liberty in their careers. Additionally, her food constructs a translocal food identity that is a reflection of both Mexican and Mexican-American experiences.

Many owners of home restaurants share a similar experience to Guido and Lucy. Their business has helped them sustain themselves financially, to experience entrepreneurship, and to share their culturally significant foods with their neighborhoods. Even though I uncover patterns in these restaurants, each chef's story is unique. Their home restaurants allow them to share who they are with others. I present a vignette of different histories crafted and sold out of the places chefs hold most dear – their homes. Many people cook with their families and friends, leaning on countertops and filling the air with laughter. Home chefs look to emulate this environment for their diners. Efficiency is sacrificed for experience, and public policy has long looked past the validity of this tradeoff. I hope the amplification of these stories will lead to more support and care to make sure that each of these businesses can flourish.

Chapter II: MEHKO Origins, History, and Evolution in the United States

Figure 1

Members of the San Diego MEHKO Coalition rally outside of San Diego County Administration Center, CA



Note. No title [Photograph], by San Diego MEHKO Coalition, 2023, Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/sandiegomehkocoalition/media>)

In 2018, the Oakland, California based food startup Josephine paused operations after food and safety health regulators served them a cease-and-desist order for illegal food sales (Han, 2018). The startup was founded in 2014 by Charley Wang, Tal Safran, and Matthew Jorgensen as a company that connected home cooks with customers around the neighborhood via the web (Han, 2018). Josephine functioned similarly to Uber Eats but instead of offering customers food from brick-and-mortar restaurants, they offered food from home cooks, allowing for both delivery and

pick-up. Every cook operating with Josephine was required to follow certain food safety protocols including the completion of a food handler's course, an interview, and a kitchen inspection from Josephine employees (Johnson, 2016).

However, Josephine's food regulations did not comply with the regulations of the State of California. At the time, the sale of homemade food was restricted under the 2013 California Homemade Food Act, which designated home-cooked food establishments as "cottage food operations" (California Department of Public Health, 2023). Under the California Homemade Food Act, strict rules regulate the types of foods that can be served by home establishments, how much the cook can make in sales, and what is defined as a "food establishment" (California Department of Public Health, 2023). Josephine created an illegal business because they facilitated the sale of meals containing perishable foods that could only legally be made at licensed kitchens. Journalist Renée Alexander clarifies these regulations in an article for *The Counter*:

California—like most other states—restricts individuals selling food to only two options: through commercial food facilities such as permitted restaurants and co-working kitchens that require licenses, insurance and space rental, or through the Cottage Food Act, which allows sales of some, mostly non-perishable foods, such as potato chips, preserves, and pies (Alexander, 2018).

A cease-and-desist order had been dealt to Josephine vendor Renée McGhee, among others. In an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, McGhee explained that she worked with Josephine while she was recovering from an injury and could not work at her regular job as a food manager (Taylor Jr., 2018). She was able to pay for rent with the money that she made on the app by selling a variety of meals such as lasagna, pulled pork, and lemon chicken (Taylor Jr., 2018). At the time, if McGhee had wanted to sell these meals, she would have needed to prepare them in

a commercial kitchen. McGhee told *The Counter* that one morning in 2016, two men knocked on her door and told her that they were from the Berkeley Environmental Health Department (Alexander, 2018). Handing her a cease and desist letter, they informed her that making and selling food from home was illegal and punishable by a fine (Alexander, 2018). She recounted to *The Counter* that:

It could not have been more shocking if they handcuffed me...In that moment, I felt like a criminal. Here I am, doing what I love. People are benefiting from it by choosing to come here, and you're telling me I'm breaking the law (Alexander, 2018).

McGhee's home restaurant, along with the average of 50 to 100 restaurants that were on Josephine each month, had been called to halt operations (Han, 2018). McGhee recalls that while she was still in business "people sat on my patio like they were family...my neighbors saw it, and stopped by to say hello, it became a wonderful sense of community" (Alexander, 2018). This type of experience between the home cook and customers had unfortunately been put on pause in the Bay Area.

Josephine's closure sparked conversations among California lawmakers interested in entrepreneurship policy. In 2018, Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia wrote Bill AB-626 which made homemade food establishments legal (AB-626 California Retail Food Code: microenterprise home kitchen operations, 2018). This section examines the policy shifts that transformed California from a watchdog state for home cooks to one that allows neighbors to legally sell homemade meals. I explore the evolution of policy governing the home-cooked food industry, starting with national cottage food laws and how we progressed to AB-626, which expands opportunities for home cooks by increasing the variety of foods they can sell and the amount they

can earn. Moreover, I argue that these expansions were made possible due to the advocacy for homemade food freedom groups.

Cottage Food Laws - The Predecessor to MEHKOs

While doing research on homemade food establishments, I came across the bakery Sweet Whimsy Shop and was impressed by the intricate cake pop designs and the entrepreneurial story behind them. The business is owned by Becca Aronowitz, who quit her job as a teacher and started her cake pop business from her home in Richmond Hill, Georgia. Now, she has reached over 100k followers on Instagram, sells hundreds of cake pops a week, and even had her cake pops of the One Direction boys featured on the James Corden talk show. Becca is partially able to do this because she is licensed as a cottage food establishment. (Sweet Whimsy Shop, n.d.)

A cottage food establishment (or cottage food operation in California) is an at-home business where individuals can produce and sell approved non-hazardous foods (CDPH, 2023). Every state requires different processes for regulating these establishments, but generally each state's Department of Food and Agriculture or Department of Public Health oversees them. These regulations are commonly known as cottage food laws. States decide what producers can sell, how much they can sell, and require routine inspections and food and health safety courses. In some states, only farmers can make cottage foods and sell them in specific venues like farmers' markets (Harvard Law School Food Law and Policy Clinic, 2022)

Even with these more specific rules, cottage food policy is being rapidly expanded and implemented throughout the country. The fact that all 50 states have cottage food laws is in stark contrast to the political landscape 40 years ago, when Vermont was the first and only state to adopt them in 197 (O'Hara, Castillo, Thilmany, McFadden, 2020; Harvard Law School Food Law and Policy Clinic, 2022). These laws are a recent development—the majority of the states implemented

cottage food laws during the 2010's (O'Hara, Castillo, Thilmany, McFadden, 2020). As the Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic reports, between "2013 and 2018, eight states legalized the production of cottage foods, and the passage of legislation has only accelerated since then, with 28 bills in 2018, 13 in 2019, and 22 in 2020 introduced to expand cottage food and home kitchen laws" (Harvard Law School Food Law and Public Policy Clinic, 2022, p. 3).

This rapid government response to cottage food legislation came in part from a public yearning for local food. Many bakers, especially in rural areas, noticed this demand in the market from their customers. As McDonald writes in her report *Flour Power: How Cottage Food Entrepreneurs are Using Their Home Kitchens to Become Their Own Bosses*, "producers are responding to increasing consumer interest in where our food comes from and who makes it" (McDonald, 2017, p. 6). One Wisconsin baker she spoke to, Lisa Kivirist, says "making something and selling it to your neighbors is the oldest newest thing, in our increasingly industrialized food world, when we don't know where our food comes from, [purchasing cottage foods is] the ultimate opportunity to meet the producer" (McDonald, 2017, p. 6). As Kivirist points out, people have been sharing food with their neighbors and communities forever—recent legislation has only just now recognized this longstanding practice.

Another reason why these laws expanded so quickly was to increase equity, acknowledging the fact that many cottage food business owners belong to disadvantaged groups. Researcher Jennifer McDonald's 2019 study is one of the only empirical research papers to survey the demographics and identities of cottage law sellers. After speaking with 775 cottage food producers in 26 states, McDonald found that cottage food sellers were primarily women, lived in rural areas, and had below median incomes (McDonald, 2019, p. 25). Additionally, most respondents treated their cottage food businesses as a supplementary occupation or hobby (McDonald, 2019). The

implementation of cottage food laws works as a significant step towards economic inclusion, offering opportunities for people from low-income backgrounds to participate in and benefit from food entrepreneurship.

These positive side-effects are explored in other studies as well. Researchers at Oregon State University found that farmers benefited from the creation of Oregon's version of cottage food laws. In 2011, the Oregon legislature passed the Farm Direct Marketing Law (FDML) which "included a cottage food provision allowing farms to make and sell certain low-risk, value-added products from farm-grown ingredients, direct to consumers, without a food processor's license" (Gwin et.al, 2018, p. 85). The largest benefit of the policy, farmers reported, was that it created new supplemental income streams (Gwin, et.al 2018). It allowed them to turn extra harvest into revenue, add variety to market stalls, and extend marketing season beyond the availability of fresh produce (Gwin, et.al 2018). Speaking to these benefits, one farmer commented "If I have a byproduct from, let's say, planting garlic, I can use my small bulbs or small cloves and make an array of different flavored pickles" (Gwin, et.al 2018, p. 95). The FDML in Oregon allows chefs to create and sell these value-added products, which increases their overall sales and allows them to stay in the market longer.

Because McDonald and Gwin et.al's studies only focused on select states, other studies are necessary to confirm that the national implementation of this policy would have a beneficial impact. O'Hara et.al's 2020 paper analyzes whether the passage of cottage food laws throughout all states has impacted the number of baked good establishments. The researchers found that, during the sample period, "cottage food laws induced a 4% increase in employer establishments and an 11% increase in nonemployer establishments" (O'Hara et.al, 2020, p.12). In the context of my project, statistics regarding nonemployer establishments are uniquely important. Nonemployer

establishments tend to be run by one person, and therefore fit the demographic of my focus. The 11% increase in these establishments is notable, and shows the beneficial effect of the policy nationwide, as well as on a state-by-state basis.

Even with these positive impacts, many states still have restrictions, but there is an ongoing effort to loosen them. If we recall Josephine's story at the time of the closure, California's cottage food law, the California Homemade Food Act, did not allow for meals containing hazardous foods like meat to be served. This is the case with most states that still restrict perishable foods from being served. California, Iowa, Montana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Utah, and Wyoming are the only states at this time that allow perishables as of September 2023 (King, 2023). Repealing excessive regulations around homecooked foods seems to be the turning point for the discourse around cottage food laws.

Community Advocacy for Homemade Food Policy

The libertarian public interest law firm Institute for Justice (IJ) is one of the primary advocates for the loosening of restrictions on homemade foods. For context, in 2021 IJ sued the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture because they had a ban on the sale of homemade foods. IJ argued that the ban was arbitrary and prevented people from "earning an honest living from home" which was "more important than ever during the pandemic" (Powers, 2021). They succeeded, and now Wisconsin permits the sale of cottage foods. IJ has continued to publish reports about state food regulations which they believe are "irrational and overly burdensome" such as how some states require recipe approval or laboratory testing behind sales (Institute for Justice, 2023). They acknowledge the benefits of cottage food laws, but they demand expansion of food policy to allow people to have more economic freedom. The IJ is one of the loudest voices for economic freedom in the home food industry.

COOK (Creating Opportunities, Opening Kitchens) Alliance is another non-profit at the forefront of advocating for the expansion of homemade food laws, and they specifically focus on laws in California. The organization was started by Matt Jorgensen who was one of the co-founders of Josephine. In a blog post, he writes that the mission of Josephine was to create “more inclusive opportunities in the food industry” and “to help long-time residents leverage their community roots and cooking skills to make the money they needed to stay in their communities” (Jorgensen, 2018). After Josephine was shut down, Jorgensen said that his interest in the cause never went away; he shifted to the non-profit sphere, saying that “while we will no longer be operating a business, or immediately helping cooks sell meals, we will continue to work on the policy changes and resources needed to empower home cooks” (Jorgensen, 2018). COOK Alliance's work ranges from political advocacy to education for MEHKO owners. They were the primary sponsor of AB-626 and are currently working on getting each county to opt-in to the policy. Additionally, they provide grants for chefs looking to start their businesses and education materials to inform people if they are interested in the policy.

In my research, I observed that the Institute of Justice (IJ) and the COOK Alliance were the most vocal non-profit organizations advocating for less restrictions in the home food industry. These two are formal organizations, but there are dozens of informal Facebook pages and forums where people help each other understand homemade food policy. The Facebook page “Creating Your Legal California Cottage Food Business” and a site I discovered named Forrager offers up-to-date information about homemade food laws. Forrager is run by David Crabill, who states that his mission “organize and improve the resources available for this growing group of small, independent cooks” (Crabill, n.d.). Crabill created an interactive map of every state, ranking them from best to worst in terms of flexibility in restrictions, and designed it so you can click through

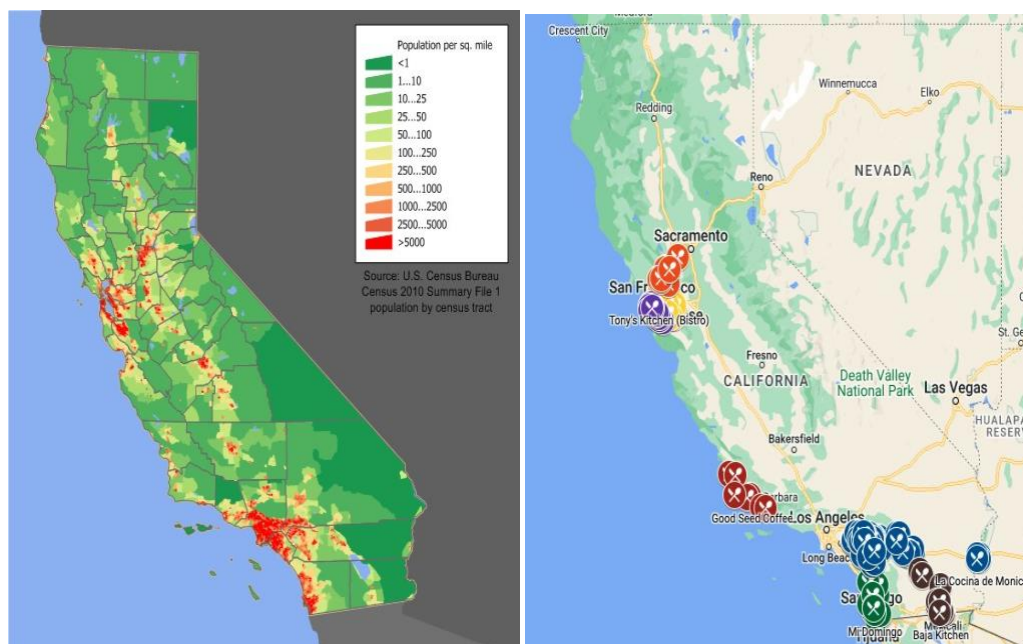
each state's regulations. He ranks California as one of the 'freer' states. The ability to serve a wide range of dishes in California, compared to states with regular cottage food laws, may seem insignificant. However, to Crabill and other homemade food advocates, looser restrictions mean people can run their businesses to fit their specific interests and skills.

The California Movement for MEHKOs

Cottage food laws work well in states where home cooks benefit from being able to create products from their own farms. However, California has a more densely populated and economically diverse set of home chefs than other states, making this rural context less relevant. I believe that this is one of the reasons that California is an interesting case study of homemade food policy—a lot of the interest in an expansion of cottage food laws came from socioeconomic diversity rather than the traditional rural farm incentive.

Figure 2

Maps comparing population density in California to the location of MEHKOs



Note. From *California Population Map* [Photograph], by U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:California_population_map.png; From Home Cooked Food MEHKO Map [Photography], by COOK Alliance, 2022, <https://www.cookalliance.org/map>

Due to the uniqueness of California's demand for cottage food-style laws, an entirely new bill was created to fill this niche: microenterprise home kitchen operations (MEHKO). A MEHKO is a food facility that allows an individual to operate a restaurant from their private residence (California Department of Public Health, 2023). In September 2018, The Homemade Food Operations Act (AB-626) was unanimously passed in the state legislature and was signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown (CDPH, 2023). The original bill spoke to the limitations of cottage food law by saying:

Under existing law, individuals can sell food through retail food facilities or cottage food operations, the latter of which being limited to a restricted list that primarily consists of nonperishable food items that can be prepared in the home. Both of these options make it difficult for the vast majority of home cooks to independently benefit from their labor, skills, and limited resources. (AB-626, 2018)

Although the bill was sympathetic, it imposed five key restrictions: first, individuals must obtain permission from their county or city to operate a MEHKO; second, they are limited to preparing 60 individual meals per week; third, their annual sales are capped at \$50,000; fourth, they are restricted to one full-time employee and fifth, they are allowed to offer dine-in, pick-up, or food delivery services (Holmes, 2018). It is not explicitly stated why these stipulations were added, but I assume that county health departments wanted to keep the businesses small and easy to manage.

When AB-626 was passed, it was suggested that even with these restrictions, the policy would still support marginalized communities and create a community. The bill's text states that it

was intended to “create significant economic opportunities for Californians that need them most — often women, immigrants, and people of color” (AB-626, 2018). A 2020 poll by the Cook Alliance, a non-profit group founded to expand MEHKO policy and support home cooks, supported this and found that 84% of MEHKO owners are women, with almost half being from Black, Latinx, or multiracial backgrounds (COOK Alliance, 2020). Additionally, 30% are first-generation immigrants, and 36% have household incomes below \$45,000 (COOK Alliance, 2020). In terms of community, the bill aims to “improve access to healthy foods for communities, particularly in food deserts with severely limited options” (AB-626 2018). As of 2022, there were roughly 230 permitted MEHKOs in California, showing that people were receptive to the concept of a MEHKO (COOK Alliance, 2022). But beyond statistics, by observing specific owners of MEHKOs we can observe more clearly the effect AB- 626 has had on California communities.

Nancy Chang was one of the first cooks to open a MEHKO in Berkeley. Chang wrote an Op-Ed for *East Bay Nosh*, saying that the idea for her restaurant Purpose & Hope started after her mom passed away from cancer and she witnessed “how broken the food system is” (Chang, 2022). From this experience, she decided that she wanted to provide “thoughtful, nutritious food” which could be a source of “empowerment and hope” (Chang, 2022). She ended up starting her business in January 2021, and writes that she continues with it because:

Food is a way for us to tell a story about who we are, where we come from and how we care about one another. MEHKOs are a way to give someone the keys to exploration in an industry that would otherwise make it impossible for the average person to tell their story, to share their gift and experience the risk and work it takes to serve someone they don't know a delicious meal. Most importantly, it takes a community that is aware of their work

and is willing to support them in a way that allows them to become successful in what they do. (Chang, 2022)

From Chang's experience, we can see that she as a MEHKO owner intended to support others in the community with her food.

Even with the rewarding experience that having a MEHKO has brought Chang, she still writes that she has a difficult time keeping her business going due to AB-626's restrictions. She writes: "If you are lucky enough to build a client base that will support you to reach that level of income, you have all of the costs, labor and taxes chipping away at that number" (Chang, 2022). She adds that with the "average food business profit margin at 5-10%, it's no wonder that over half of the East Bay businesses that attempted to operate as a permitted MEHKO went [in] another direction" (Chang, 2022). The Bay Area is one of the most expensive cities in the country, so being limited to making \$50,000 is not enough to support yourself — "In order to keep Purpose & Hope alive, I work two jobs to keep my bills paid and the business going" says Chang (Chang, 2022). From Chang's descriptions, there is still a need for amendments to the bill.

Since Chang wrote her Op-Ed in 2022, the State Legislature updated AB-626. AB 1325, signed in July 2023, eased some of the restrictions of its predecessor (Holmes, 2023). It doubles gross annual sales to \$100,000 and allows cooks to serve 90 meals. AB 1325 has not been implemented yet at the time this thesis was written, meaning that chefs still follow AB-626. However, even AB 1325 does not solve one of the biggest challenges of AB-626 in California: the opt-in clause. AB 1325 is opt-in by county or by local city governments, meaning that there are inconsistent policies for MEHKOs throughout the state (AB-1325 Microenterprise home kitchen operations, 2023). As of October 2023, only 11 counties out of 58 in California opted-in: Riverside, Imperial, Lake, Alameda, Solano, Santa Barbara, City of Berkeley, Sierra, Monterey, San Mateo,

San Diego (COOK Alliance 2022). Riverside was one of the first counties to opt-in, being the home of Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia. One of the biggest reasons that this restriction is difficult to lift is that each county has its own health department. As long as health restrictions vary by county, it is difficult to mandate specific health-related policy statewide.

It can be discouraging for aspiring home restaurant entrepreneurs to hear that their county hasn't approved MEHKOs yet or does not have plans to. In the 2020 petition on Change.org titled "Opt-In and Implement AB-626 in Orange County" Giselle Hoang wrote:

For as long as counties do not opt-in, thousands of cooks in our communities will continue to lack access to economic opportunities within the food industry and create further disparity in access, opportunity and income. New pathways to entrepreneurship will remain out of reach for underserved populations — including single parents, recent immigrants, and the financially insecure. Public health risks to consumers that currently exist from the informal food economy will continue to go unchecked. (Hoang, 2020)

At this moment, it has received around 6,000 signatures at the time of writing. People clearly care about this policy and are likely emboldened by the prior receptiveness of the government to criticism regarding this issue.

The policy surrounding homemade food laws is still very much in its infancy, even in a state like California, which has comparatively looser laws than the rest of the United States. Research on the impact of these homemade food laws has primarily focused on cottage food laws. This research has revealed that cottage food businesses are predominantly run by rural, low-income women, who use their businesses for supplemental income. Following the implementation of cottage food laws, there has been an increase in the number of producers content with the expanded opportunities to grow their businesses. However, cottage food laws only permit a limited

range of food products and restrict perishable foods and certain types of meals. These restrictions exclude individuals who wish to prepare other items, such as meat products. The at-home, urban-residing chefs who prepare food in Microenterprise Home Kitchen Operations (MEHKO) have extra needs from what cottage food laws allow them to do because whether they are on farms or not is irrelevant. MEHKO laws share similar goals in providing opportunities to underrepresented and disadvantaged restaurant owners. The following sections will delve more deeply into the intentions behind MEHKOs through two case studies.

Chapter III: Guido Totaro

“My food brings people the taste of remembering” – Guido Totaro

Figure 3

Guido Folding Empanadas



Note. Guido Totaro [Photograph], by Gabriela Camacho

Pampa Empanadas, the MEHKO run by Guido Totaro in Corona, CA began with a dream that originated in his home city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Guido’s dream had always been to open an empanada business in Argentina. Empanadas are a specialty of his country; tourists love them, and they enjoy popularity worldwide. However, his plans took a turn after his wife was offered a job as a professor at California State University, Fullerton in 2014, and they moved to California as their new home. Though he worked in real estate initially, the idea of opening a

restaurant nagged at him. As the pandemic arrived, like so many other home chefs, Guido got the opportunity to become more serious about working to make his dreams a reality.

In this chapter, I analyze the role of the COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst for many home chefs starting their businesses. I also examine how AB-626 and community efforts have guided an immigrant chef who lacked prior experience in the food industry. The chapter delves into the challenges he faced in owning a restaurant, and how operating a Microenterprise Home Kitchen Operation (MEHKO) became an effective introduction for Guido. Additionally, I discuss the ways in which Guido and other home chefs have leveraged social media and homemade food startup apps to expand their businesses.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Opportunity

Takeout food culture increased in popularity during the pandemic, changing the lives of those working in the food industry. In 2020, restaurant tech provider Paytronix reported that on their vending platform, “a vast majority of those takeout orders (89%) were placed online, either from a restaurant’s website, mobile app or third-party marketplace” (Guszkowski, 2021). Moreover, “61% of those online orders were from restaurants that offered only sit-down dining prior to the pandemic” (Guszkowski, 2021). Another change was that it gave people with no industry experience a chance to experiment, share food with their neighbors, and maybe even start a business. These cooks experimented with the take-out option by marketing themselves on social media and home restaurant food start-ups.

In 2021, journalist Stephanie Breijo from the *Los Angeles Times* wrote a story about two sisters who, like Guido, viewed the pandemic as a time to start a restaurant. The sisters, Tara and Celene Carrara ran a Balinese pop-up out of their home and hosted guests in their driveway in

Glendale (Breijo, 2021) “I don’t think that without COVID, and without the birth of the underground [food] movement, that we’d be doing this,” said Celine Carrara. “It’s bittersweet because so much of the landscape has shifted, and we’ve seen restaurants close that we love, and yet there’s all this new stuff on the horizon, which is also really exciting. It’s kind of surreal” (Breijo, 2021). The Carrara sisters astutely point out that COVID has allowed this new food movement to gain momentum, making way for people to dip their toes in the industry.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic allowed people with no restaurant experience to have the time and space to experiment, it was a challenging period for workers at pre-existing restaurants. Lower demand meant higher turnover, causing laid-off chefs and cooks to venture into home businesses as well. In 2021, *Time* reported that restaurant sales across the country were down \$240 billion in 2020 from expected levels (Vesoulis, 2021). During this time of economic struggle, restaurants fired a lot of their staff, forcing them to find jobs elsewhere. In 2021, journalist Tejal Rao from the *New York Times* profiled Erik Piedrahita who was let go from his job as the executive sous chef at Bon Temps (Rao, 2021). After this change in circumstances, Piedrahita took a chance and opened his own home restaurant The Neighborhood Barbecue in his father’s backyard (Rao, 2021). He constructed a brick oven and grilled himself even though he did not have any “formal training in barbecue whatsoever” (Rao, 2021). Piedrahita marketed and sold his takeout meals on Instagram and the restaurant reservation app Tock and consistently sold out (Rao, 2021). Despite the success, Piedrahita had “considered giving up on the project entirely” due to the constraints of equipment and space possible when operating from a home (Rao, 2021). While the backyard restaurant model allowed Piedrahita to continue cooking during the pandemic, it was no replacement for working in a restaurant. The Neighborhood Barbeque is no longer operating, but

at the time it was something special; it was food made by “your neighbor” who happened to be an executive chef (the neighborhood bbq, 2021).

The popularity of restaurants like Piedrahita’s gained unwanted attention from County Health Officials, as many were operating without permits from the county. Los Angeles does not participate in AB-626, meaning many of these home restaurants that arose during the pandemic were illegal. Journalist Stephanie Breijo interviewed Liza Frias, the Los Angeles director of environmental health services, to get the government’s view of the conflict. She labeled the restaurants an “underground industry,” and said that more people should (1) move towards the path of making cottage food (which is legal in Los Angeles), then (2) transition into cooking in a shared kitchen, and finally (3) start a restaurant (Breijo, 2021). Frias seems confident in the potential for the permit process enabling people to work their way up to owning a restaurant. However, regardless of experience, opening a restaurant is a difficult and taxing experience, and for many, unapproachable. Lots of commas but it’s the only grammatically correct option

This was the case with Guido. With no background in the food industry, diving into owning a restaurant was daunting for him. He had entrepreneurial experience, having started a clothing business in Buenos Aires. Even with this, he said that he was essentially starting from scratch after the move because everything in the U.S. was different; he said the “way of making a business, the society, everything” was new to him (G. Totaro, personal communication, October 20, 2023). He continued:

I am still learning about businesses...which for me is very new. It is one thing to make empanadas for your family and another thing to make empanadas for people who come to buy your service. You have to have the right quantities, and start to manage your time well. One day I make one filling, another day I make another type of filling. I am learning how

to manage the kitchen, not so much to cook for [my] family, but for other people. (G. Totaro, personal communication, October 20, 2023)

What partially helped Guido learn how to open and run his kitchen was a program organized by the City of Corona and a non-profit organization named Emprendedor@s. The program aimed to educate and assist budding Hispanic entrepreneurs from Southern California in starting their own businesses by providing free courses taught in Spanish (Asociación de Emprendedor@s, n.d.). For context, in 2021, 49.1% of people in Corona were Hispanic or Latino, 43.7% speak a language other than English at home, and 26% of people were foreign-born (United States Census Bureau, 2021). In an interview, the founder Monica Robles states that she started the program “to help community members with no support to find their passion and build successful businesses” (O’Connor, 2023). The program helps Spanish-speaking people navigate language barriers in the business world. Additionally, they provide technical skills training in financing and marketing. This program is, as Guido told me, how it all began.

Guido said that people from the community helped him as well. For example, he met someone who owned restaurants in Corona who gave him “very good advice,” introducing him to the MEHKO permit (G. Totaro, personal communication, October 20, 2023). This person explained that the permit was a great opportunity to start your business from your home, establish clients, and see it grow. Guido now endorses MEHKO as his friend did. He recognizes that MEHKO allowed his business to expand with this permit and says that “MEHKO is a very good way to start a business” (G. Totaro, personal communication, October 20, 2023)

I believe that Guido’s journey is following the model that the county health inspector Frias had proposed—the home-based food policy allows people to move from their home kitchens to a restaurant. From my conversation with Guido, it seemed that running a MEHKO has taught him a

lot and that this experience would eventually lead to him owning a restaurant. I do wonder, though, if this was because Guido had a support network and programs *on top of* the policy that allowed him to navigate running a business. For some, the policy may not be enough on its own to make entrepreneurship more accessible.

Barriers to Entry for Restaurants

This inaccessibility is amplified as we take into consideration the exorbitant costs of running a restaurant. According to a survey from Restaurant Owner, restaurant startup costs can range anywhere between \$175,500 and \$750,500 (Rankin, 2021). COOK Alliance estimated that it costs at least \$50,000 to start a food truck and around \$300,000 to start a restaurant in California (COOK Alliance, n.d.). Even restaurants with high earnings and culinary world clout are difficult to sustain. In 2020, Eater covered Mei Mei, the Boston-based restaurant owned by James Beard winner Irene Li. Li raised \$243,957 to open her restaurant (Spencer, 2020). In 2019, her income was \$1.2 million and after a variety of costs (such as maintenance, staff salaries, cost of goods, administrative expenses, etc...) the net income of her restaurant was \$22,166. Li told Eater “This is the final story. It’s not nothing. It’s not great. But this is where we are” (Spencer, 2020). COOK Alliance shows how difficult it is to open a restaurant and Li’s discouraging tone speaks volumes on how difficult it is to sustain one. This leaves low-income folks, especially low-income people of color, with few options if they are interested in the opening a restaurant.

I specifically researched the statistics for Latinx businesses, as my project features two Latino chefs, to highlight the additional barriers Latinx entrepreneurs face when starting a business. A study by The Stanford Latino Entrepreneurship Initiative reported that:

In 2022, Latino-owned businesses were 50% more likely to seek financing than White-owned businesses. Latino-owned businesses that applied for loans at national banks had,

on average, three times the gross revenue of White-owned businesses, as well as less debt and similar credit scores. Although Latino-owned businesses had higher approval rates for loans under \$50,000, they were substantially less likely to have larger loans approved. (Steen, 2023)

It is unlikely that an average person can open a restaurant without taking out loans or having investors. Given this inequity, MEHKO is a potential way for minorities to experience owning a restaurant-like establishment without the exorbitant financial burden.

The significant difference in cost to open a MEHKO compared to a restaurant makes it a more accessible option. In the text of AB626, lawmakers acknowledge that the high ongoing costs of renting a communal kitchen and running a restaurant influenced the creation of the policy. Due to this, they were sure that opening a MEHKO would be a more affordable option. COOK Alliance verifies this, stating that starting a MEHKO costs, on average, under \$1000 (COOK Alliance, n.d.). In addition, with recent changes to MEHKOs, chefs will soon be able to earn \$100,000 in sales which creates a much more viable profit margin for a lot more people (AB –1325, 2023).

In short, AB-626 might be effective at reducing formal barriers to entry into the food industry cost-wise, but it is open-ended in how the policy can actually be implemented and sustained in minority communities. Guido's story highlights the vast amount of de facto support he received to even be in his position. Without an entrepreneurial background, supportive community, and fortuitous circumstances, who knows if I would have been interviewing him about making empanadas.

The Tech (Giant) Loop Hole of AB-626

Many startups launched after AB-626 with the mission to provide a community and platform for cooks who are minorities. Guido currently works with Foodnome, which markets

itself as “the first legal marketplace for home-cooked food in California” (Foodnome, n.d.). Foodnome is an app that connects home cooks to customers via pick-up options or delivery drivers, operating similarly to the model of Uber. With the app, people order from home chefs instead of brick-and-mortar restaurants. Guido said that, as far as he knew, Foodnome was the first of its kind. “Regardless of whether or not it's the first, for sure many more are going to open up” (G. Totaro, personal communication, October 20, 2023).

Foodnome was launched in Riverside County in 2019, giving cooks \$500 to support them in starting their business to stand out (Foodnome, 2019). On Foodnome’s website, they wrote that they would guide cooks through the permitting process and handle all of the paperwork with the county (Foodnome, 2019). Making the process look easier, they advertised “all you have to do is sit back, schedule your kitchen walkthrough with the county, and receive your home restaurant permit” (Foodnome, 2019). Once brought in, vendors on Foodnome are charged a platform fee of 7% for cooks plus a 2.9% standard payment processing fee (Foodnome, 2019). For context, DoorDash, the current leader in the food delivery market, charges commissions ranging from 15-30% (Beckett, 2021). Guido observed that this shift towards online platforms is not limited to food; it's a broader market trend. “The other day I was at the mall and I saw that many stores are closed because people are buying online...the same is happening with gastronomy” (G. Totaro, personal communication, October 20, 2023).

Critics of AB-626 bring up how much the bill emphasizes cooks’ use of tech platforms. The bill requires an “Internet food service intermediary” to regulate the sales of prepared meals, including not only the chefs’ own websites but also the series of start-ups that are popping up to cater to this market of home cooked take-out food (AB-626, 2018). Josephine and Foodnome are

the ones that I have mentioned so far, but there are others such as Shef and DishDivvy. Christina Oatfield is a lawyer and local food advocate who told KQED that she is “worried these gig economy tech companies are really going to dominate the home-made food sector” (Harnett, 2020). It is a story already seen with companies like Uber and Lyft that quickly became popular and then cut workers’ wages (Harnett, 2020). Oatfield adds, “This bill was really marketed as something that would help immigrants and people of color. The reality that I observed was that those immigrants and marginalized people weren’t at the negotiating table” (Harnett, 2020). The bill does not include specific language regulating tech companies and the home-cooked food service, raising the question of who really benefits from this policy: marginalized chefs or the tech companies eager to “assist” them?

It is expected that tech companies will have a continued role in this growing policy and the MEHKO industry. As I mentioned previously, Matt Jorgenson is both the former owner of Josephine and the current leader of COOK Alliance, was the primary sponsor of AB-626. Airbnb was also a sponsor of AB-626, and they “spent thousands to lobby on the bill’s behalf, most likely because the company is building home-cooked food into curated vacations, or “experiences” that Airbnb sells on its website” (Shyong, 2019). The marketing done by these startups advertises the homemade and authentic experience. On Foodnome’s website, a customer might be influenced to try a specific cuisine from photos or by the personalized biography of every chef. LaTanya K.’s bio reads “Serving up some delicious food that brings back childhood memories. Full and happy is the goal” (LNK Tacos, n.d.). Moreover, Cookin, an app that received \$12.5 million in funding, includes a handwritten note by the cook with every order (Hayes, n.d.). This strategy aims at creating a more intimate experience for the consumer, differentiating these services from traditional food delivery options.

How Home Cooks Build Their Networks

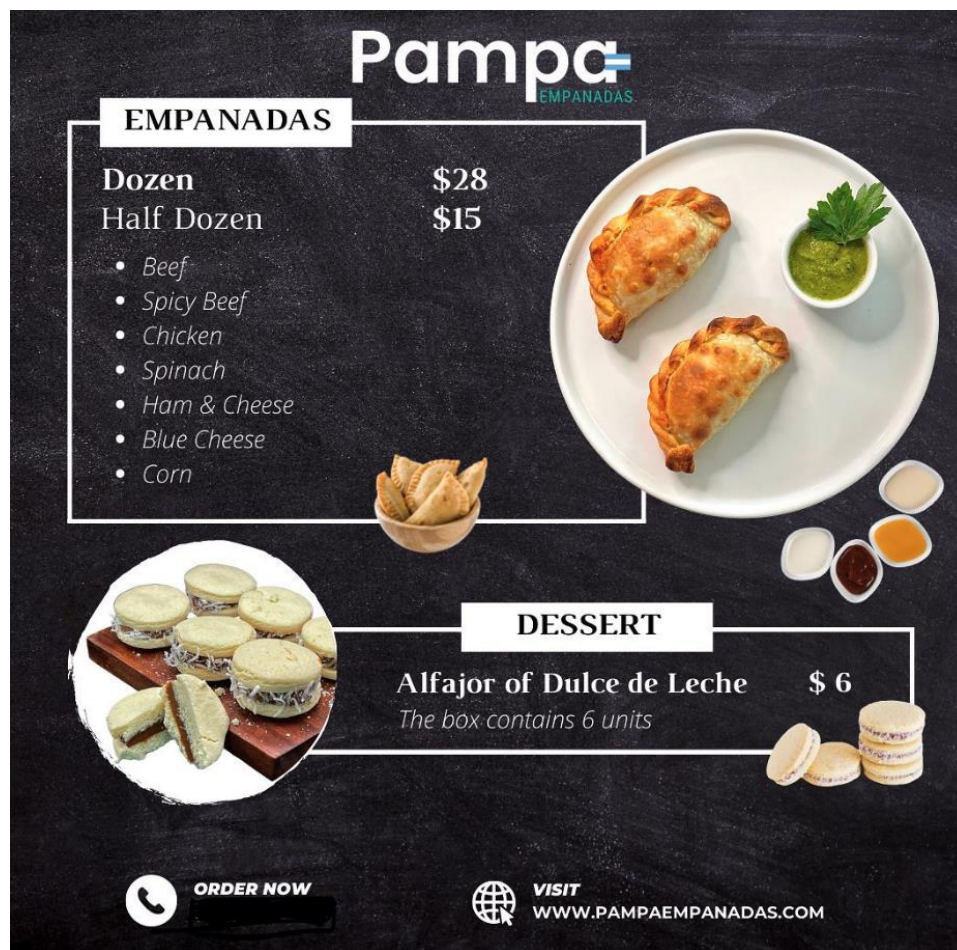
These gig economy apps undoubtedly play a significant role in offering platforms for these cooks. They provide drivers, assist with the permitting process, and increase visibility for their restaurants. However, not all credit can be given to the apps, as it the chefs' own marketing and reputation that highlight their businesses. Even before the pandemic, it was not uncommon to see social media pages dedicated to selling food made by home cooks, private chefs, and caterers. People primarily posted on Facebook groups and Facebook Marketplace. One LA-based Facebook group, Everything food 562/626/323, wrote in their bio— “This group is for anything that has to do with food from catering to cakes, homemade food anything” (Everything food 562/626/323, n.d.). Another group, How to Sell Home Cooked Food, created in 2017, had the mission to teach others how to run an at-home business before startups like Foodnome were popular. Their bio says “We believe home cooking helps build healthy, resilient communities and create economic opportunities for the people that need them most. We support a future where talented home cooks can legally and safely share meals with their neighbors” (How to Sell Home Cooked Food, n.d.). These types of businesses were nothing out of the ordinary - it was people selling food to their neighbors.

This act of homecooking became trendy during the pandemic when the *New York Times* and other major publications recognized that chefs were taking part in these kinds of businesses. The *New York Times* titled one of the articles about this trend as “Cooks Turned Instagram Into the World’s Greatest Takeout Menu” (Rao, 2021). They called these restaurants “homegrown pop-ups” (Rao, 2021). Based on Guido’s description, Instagram was his takeout menu where he posts photos of the foods and updates on his availabilities. Instead of a paper menu or a QR code, Guido keeps

his menu on his Instagram story and feed. He consistently offers a classic arrangement of empanadas.

Figure 4

Pampa Empanadas Menu



Note. From *Today's menu* [Photograph], by Guido Totaro, 2023, Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cx0bH1grMW4/>).

Since everything is digital, Guido must be intentional about his public image:

I promote myself a lot with Instagram and I have my website. Because if you don't have a restaurant, people don't know you, right? Here in my house, I don't have a sign, so I use Instagram as if it were a shop window. I try to be present for my clients and be seen by

them. I advertise and do paid promotions to reach more people. That is how I promote myself. Then a lot of people come to me through Foodnome on my web page. (G. Totaro, personal communication, October 20, 2023)

Instagram is today's equivalent of flyers or billboards—social media is a necessary skill for reaching more people. Moreover, Guido told me that people have found him via other Argentine residents in Corona. He says people “get to know empanadas” by trying his food at events, and from there his information gets passed down from person to person (G. Totaro, personal communication, October 20, 2023). His social media page increases visibility, but so does being featured on Instagram stories and word of mouth sharing that others do. All methods are working as Guido currently has around 1,600 followers and consistently sells out on Foodnome.

The Home Restaurant Experience

Guido's goal is to provide this homemade and nostalgic taste. Working from a standard home kitchen, Guido creates dozens of empanadas each week. All of the fillings are made from scratch, and each empanada is folded by hand. In Argentine cuisine, the folded edges of the empanadas are known as *repulge*. Traditionally, the *repulge* is made in different shapes to distinguish between the empanada fillings. Guido says that industrial-made empanadas are distinguished by a stamp instead of the *repulge*. He dislikes this method, preferring to make his empanadas “very homemade” (G. Totaro, personal communication, October 20, 2023).

The entire procedure, which involves preparing trays of filling, meticulously hand-folding each empanada, and baking them in batches, is time-consuming. However, this effort is justified as it enables Guido's customers to enjoy *comida autóctona* or traditional food (G. Totaro, personal communication, October 20, 2023). Going even further, Guido takes the extra time to sell products from his home country: “I got in touch with a distributor here in the western

part of the United States that distributes Argentinian products. He is a distributor that sells to restaurants all over the world and I buy tapas from him” (G. Totaro, personal communication, October 20, 2023). Guido’s effort to create a homemade and authentic experience for his customers explains his success. The newfound demand for MEHKO’s post-pandemic makes perfect sense as you experience the care put into these home chefs’ craft firsthand.

Guido’s goal is to make his cooking as authentic as possible. Given that authenticity is subjective, he defines it as food and cooking practices that are close to tradition and avoid fusion:

Here in the United States, you can eat many types of empanadas, including Argentinean ones. But they add other types of flavors that appeal more to other cultures. They make spicier empanadas for the Mexican market, and empanadas with ingredients like barbecue to win the American market. I am known for making very Argentinian empanadas. I make beef, chicken, ham and cheese, spinach, and humita empanadas, which are the traditional Argentinian empanadas. (G. Totaro, personal communication, October 20, 2023)

Guido avoids mixing other cultures in his cooking to ensure the best experience for two distinct groups: Argentines who seek familiar flavors, and non-Argentines whom he aims to introduce traditional Argentine cuisine. He says the majority of his clientele is Latino from Mexico and Chile. He also has a lot of American customers too, who might have tried his food from a friend or seen him on Foodnome. Ultimately, Guido envisions maintaining this inclusivity when he opens a restaurant:

For the people who are Argentine, I want them to feel like they are at home and they are in a familiar place that brings back memories. For the people who are not Argentine, I want

them to come and eat Argentine food and feel like they are in an Argentine place. (G. Totaro, personal communication, October 20, 2023)

When people talk about Guido's business, they advertise the quality and the familiar taste of mom's cooking. One user commented on his Instagram post: "Awesome...you remember me the taste of my mami! Lovely!" and "Thank you Guido. Your empanadas were delicious, as good as my Mom's empanadas and that's a huge compliment!" (pampaempanadas_us, n.d.). Guido's creation of "mom's cooking" and an Argentine cuisine, through familiar tastes and decor, evokes a feeling of nostalgia for "back home" in his clients. Lorena Muñoz interviewed Latina street food vendors in Los Angeles and pointed out how they construct this idea of "back home" which refers to "vernacular landscapes from mental images, memory, and nostalgic feelings that are all familiar to them and are, in a way, street vendors' sense of place" (Muñoz, 2017, p. 290). Granted, the idea of home is subjective, but through his use of familiar dishes and visuals, Guido appeals to many Argentine people's memories of home.

MEHKO owners offer a unique dining experience by serving dishes that evoke memories of home-cooked food. This contrasts with the environment of traditional restaurants which may depersonalize and commercialize such memories. In this chapter, I analyze the conditions that allowed Guido to open his own MEHKO and share his culture with others. Moreover, I show how startup apps are trying to take up space in this policy. Even with the influence of these companies, cooks still have a presence that exists outside of these apps.

Chapter IV: Lucy Silva

"I want them to feel like they are eating something that is made special for them" – Lucy Silva

Figure 5

Lucy Silva



Note. From *Lucy Silva Barra de Pan* [Photograph] by Lucy Silva, 2021, YouTube

(https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIHsITHyrP_EAzsaG1QZEg).

In the previous chapters, I analyzed how owning a MEHKO has given chefs more opportunities to start their businesses and eventually transition into a restaurant if they are interested. In this section, I explore how Chef Lucy benefits from the policy in a different way. During the time of our interview, she did not wish to open a restaurant and enjoyed the flexibility

that running a MEHKO provided her. What makes her stand out is the food she makes and the relationship she has with the people she cooks for.

Samuel H. Yamashita discusses this relationship between food, identity, and community in his essay “The Quest for an Ideal Culinary Hyperlocalism” - a source that I will use in this section to explore the nature of locality in these home restaurants’ cuisines. Using the case study of Yoshihiro Imai’s restaurant monk in Kyoto, Japan. Yamashita argues that it is an ideal hyperlocal restaurant because Imai’s intentions are not undermined by his restaurants’ fame; he is reliant on what is sourced locally, he explores forgotten ingredients, he is affordable, and he draws in people from local communities.

This section discusses Chef Lucy’s Barra de Pan and explores the ways in which she is a specific type of hyperlocal chef: a translocal one. Arjun Appadurai defines translocality in his paper “The Production of Locality” as an in-between of a local community and a nation-state. It is the “conflicting relation between neighbourhoods, translocal allegiances and the logic of the nationstate” (Appadurai, 1995, p. 220). Chef Lucy’s cuisine aims to bring the familiar taste of Mexican cuisine (the nation-state) to her Southern California (local community) Chicano customers. Chicanos have a translocal background, meaning that although they demographically reside in one place, their identities and histories come from all over Mexico. Chef Lucy uses ingredients, recipes, and techniques from different regions in Mexico so that her cuisine is equally as diverse as her customers. While she does not mirror the other aspects of hyperlocalism perfectly, she is local in that she serves a cuisine that her customers can see themselves in.

Arjun Appadurai’s theory in “How to Make a National Cuisine” can also be used to expand on Chef Lucy’s practices of presenting authentic Mexican cuisine to a diverse urban Southern California demographic. He analyzes cookbooks about Indian food written in “English and

directed at an Anglophone readership” and how they play a key role in defining India’s national cuisine (Appadurai, 1988, p. 1). Chef Lucy does not have any cookbooks, but I argue that her restaurant functions as the equivalent of one. The cookbooks Appadurai discusses write about regional traditions in a way that “[interplays] regional inflections and national standardization,” resulting in an inaccurate representation of the diversity of Indian cuisine (Appadurai, 1988, p. 6). The reason for this is that the authors of these cookbooks are urban, upper-middle-class women who draw their culinary knowledge from their own family traditions and social circles. To an extent, Chef Lucy falls under the Appadurian model because she wishes to accurately portray a diverse Mexican cuisine in her restaurant as an urban woman that draws from her own travel and memories she has retained about her mother’s cooking. However, I argue that this practice does not have to be looked down on due to the way in which she attempts to create a Mexican cuisine for her customers' palates rather than her own.

Lucy and Her Experience in the Food Industry

I had the privilege of speaking with Chef Lucy Silva in her cozy backyard restaurant, Barra de Pan, to begin to understand her own journey in starting her at-home restaurant. Chef Lucy was born in Tijuana and moved to Southern California when she was a child. Throughout the years, she worked in many different restaurants and participated in more community-based food efforts. In 2010, Lucy started a non-profit called Food Runners that teaches young volunteers life skills, including cooking low-cost catered meals for others (Soifer, 2012). One past activity Lucy organized was working with 15 students to cook a meal for Corona firefighters. Lucy told a Corona-based blog that she was inspired to start her nonprofit by her mother, who always gave back to the community (Soifer, 2012). “My mom is my biggest inspiration,” Silva said. “I realize now I’m doing the same thing my mom did. I can feel the love from the kids and the mothers of

the kids” (Soifer, 2012). Her most recent experience included managing a Disneyland restaurant and delivering produce to Corona Child Nutrition Services (Elliot, 2020). As the pandemic hit her hometown of Corona, like so many others with her expertise, Lucy thought that she might want to open a place of her own.

An at-home kitchen was not always her vision, however. In an interview with Spectrum News 1, Chef Lucy explained that opening a brick-and-mortar was always her dream, but costs of over \$75,000 made this an impossible task (Wagner, 2020). Her plans changed after the introduction of Bill 626—the low-cost permit that would allow her to serve food out of her home. The startup costs required for her to designate her house as a MEHKO were only \$1,000, a more realistic amount. Chef Lucy added “I didn’t have to literally raise or get a loan from the bank...I’m really thankful that this bill passed and has given [me] opportunities” (Wagner, 2020). Finding a restaurant model that was economically feasible for Chef Lucy was the first step towards starting her business.

But with a low-cost startup came extra effort toward running her backyard restaurant. Chef Lucy told me that she is the cook, the meat department, the purchaser, the baker, the dishwasher, the table cleaner, the server, and even does her own marketing and social media (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). It was evident from my conversations with Lucy and Guido that running a restaurant out of your backyard means you have to become your own professional staff as well. Not only does her own capacity limit her hours, but Lucy can only operate Barra de Pan part-time due to county regulations. To make up for lost income, she works at Corona Child Nutrition Services delivering food to the elementary school near her house as her day job.

Although Lucy has to work under restrictions, she is glad that MEHKO allows her flexibility with her business. She said that she would much rather have a MEHKO than a brick-

and-mortar restaurant because restaurants are expensive, time-consuming, and unstable. She told me:

I don't have to pay [for a] brick-and-mortar space. I don't have to pay insurance. I don't have to pay employees. I don't have to deal with employees. I make \$50,000 a year (referring to how many restaurants make \$50,000) and I don't have the headaches. And I have all this time. I have four extra days to do whatever. (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022)

Lucy claimed that the situation for restaurants worsened over the pandemic. She said that the restaurants did not have the “money to back [them] up” if they were not selling enough food (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). Her conversation highlights the gap in equity of restaurant ownership, pointing out that big establishments often have the backing of investors. In contrast, average people like her usually do not have this kind of financial support. Even though profits from her MEHKO are limited, what she makes from Barra de Pan and her day job are still enough to support herself and allow her to travel to Mexico frequently to see family.

Not having to deal with the red tape involved in operating a brick-and-mortar establishment allows Lucy to focus on what really matters to her - the process of making the food. Many large or fine-dining establishments use a brigade system where the kitchen is organized into a hierarchy and each chef is assigned to a specific task of meal preparation (Le Cordon Bleu, n.d). Lucy disliked this system because she never got to see a meal from start to end. She described the difference between traditional restaurants and MEHKOs by saying:

Somebody else is preparing the food that somebody else was going to cook. And that's the difference between a restaurant [and MEHKO]. It's hardly ever the chef in restaurants that

will literally cook something from first, from beginning to end. It never happens in a restaurant. Never. (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022)

As mentioned earlier, it is hard work for Lucy to have so many different roles, but she enjoys being there for every step of the process. “Being able to see something from start to finish” brings a satisfaction that goes “above and beyond,” said Lucy (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022).

Lucy acknowledges that MEHKOs aren't the most lucrative business, but she is content with that fact. Another complaint that Lucy has with the traditional restaurant structure is the focus on profits over the quality of the food. She explains, “Ultimately it's about the profit, how fast they can do it and how easily they can do it. And when they buy stuff food, it's high volume, low quality” (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). She thinks this happens because “people want more and want big things” in our society (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). Lucy finds that running her own smaller kitchen is more rewarding, even if it doesn't make as much money as a big restaurant. She says, “Of course, the profits are not going to be like super high, like a big restaurant. But the satisfaction [of having a MEHKO] is above and beyond” (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). This shows that Lucy values the joy of cooking and serving quality food more than solely making money.

At the end of our interview, I asked Lucy if she sees the restaurant industry shifting towards MEHKOs. She shared insights from her conversation with David Chang (yes, she was featured on his show). He believed that some restaurants might close and “stay closed,” indicating a potential turn towards MEHKOs to “survive” (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). However, Lucy believes that many chefs might undervalue MEHKOs, possibly due to a perception of lesser prestige compared to traditional restaurants. She argues, “you could be doing well, you are not

going to be making six figures but you're going to be really content" (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). She feels that if more chefs explored this avenue, "they would realize that they would make so much more than money" (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). Lucy is convinced that many don't see the full potential of MEHKOs, stating, "they would get benefit so much from doing something like this, then doing a restaurant" (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). Her perspective highlights a broader view of success in the culinary world based less on prestige and profits and more on connections with customers.

When we contrast Lucy's journey with Guido's, it becomes clear that past experiences in the food industry might shape how one approaches opening a MEHKO. Guido views his MEHKO as a stepping stone, a way to build his skills and experience towards his ultimate goal of opening his own restaurant. Lucy's perspective is different. Having already been deeply involved in restaurant management, she's familiar with the challenges it entails – the long hours, the financial burdens, and more. This firsthand experience has shaped her decision not to pursue restaurant ownership again. Instead, she values the flexibility and reduced stress that a MEHKO offers. This highlights how the MEHKO model serves a dual purpose: it's a launchpad for budding entrepreneurs like Guido, and an alternative for professionals like Lucy, who are looking for a change in their career trajectory.

Lucy, like many MEHKO owners, spent a lot of time during the pandemic cooking for family and friends. Having tasted Lucy's delicious food, they encouraged her to open a restaurant. A member told her about Foodnome, explaining how she could earn money by selling her meals. This opportunity was appealing to Lucy, especially since she was already aware of the cottage food license but felt it had too many restrictions and noted there was "a lot of competition" in the pastry business (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). She applied to open a MEHKO

instead because it was a more viable option. Once she was licensed, she decided to start off by serving pizza. She built a brick oven her backyard and soon after, people were flowing in:

I started sharing pizza with friends just to perfect the recipe of pizza dough. And before I knew it I was selling \$5 pizzas and people were coming. They were picking up the food from the gate...and people would ask me you think you could do something in your house?
(L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022)

Lucy tried out hosting a family gathering and from there she saw that her backyard restaurant model worked.

The Restaurant Space - A Model of Mexico

Barra de Pan's charming character is made possible by Chef Lucy's eclectic and warm energy—drawing from the model of food sharing she remembers from Mexico. To enter the restaurant, I had to walk around the side of her house, revealing a collection of mismatched chairs and tables, *papel picado* and string lights hanging from the sides, and the sound of *boleros* in the background. I had never seen anything like it! To Chef Lucy, a restaurant like this was a replica of the settings she grew up with in Mexico.

When I asked Chef Lucy about her opinion on the emergence of at-home restaurants, she laughed a little, saying that this style of restaurant is very common in Mexico. She based her restaurant on Mexican *fondas*, the inexpensive and unofficial restaurants in town centers or people's homes. Even before the pandemic, Chef Lucy knew that she wanted to replicate the experience of going to *fonditas*, “walking through the streets...admiring the churches...” and coming across a place where “doors [are] open”, a “fire is going” and there are lots of “flowers” and “lots of color” (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). Her goal was to bring the familiarity and authenticity of the intimate Mexican dining scene to her restaurant.

The question of how to communicate authenticity and represent traditions from one's home country is a focal point in Appadurai's piece. In many ways, Chef Lucy has taken on the role of an Appadurian female agent who transmits regional cuisines to urban Western settings. Fitting the Appadurian model, she uses her free time to travel to Mexico and take notes of what elements she believes should be brought back to the United States in order to evoke a sense of authenticity in her restaurant. She says that "through the traveling that I have done in Mexico, I realized Mexico is always vivid with lots of colors, and everything tastes so good because [you are eating] in a place where there's so much color" (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). Her traveling places her in the "spatially mobile class of professionals", a demographic with the power to define cuisines in their cosmopolitan cities (Appadurai, 1998, p. 6).

With this memory in mind, she decided to paint the wall in her backyard to "mimic the towns of Mexico in Michoacan" (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). Michoacan is in West-Central Mexico and distant from her Northern hometown of Tijuana, meaning that, like the Appadurian woman, a certain amount of research into the different regions of a country is required to create a sense of what "Mexican-style" restaurants there are. She said that "you're going to find [that] a lot of homes and businesses have the bottom of the structure painted red and the top is always white...and then the lettering—the first letter is always red, and then all the letters are black. So we made it look like a wall from Mexico" (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). From an Appadurian perspective, Chef Lucy is attempting to create a national Mexican culinary experience through her travels.

The way street vending is performed in the streets of Los Angeles is mediated by collective geographic imaginaries of how street vending is supposed to be back "home" in Latin America by the vendors and customers. In her research on street food vendors in Los Angeles, she argues that

the jingles they chant, the color of the carts, and their attire are all used to create a recreate these vernacular landscapes from mental images, memories, and nostalgic feelings that are all familiar to them and are, in a way, street vendors' "sense of place."

Ingredients, Culinary Techniques, & Cuisine

There is no such thing as a typical night at Barra de Pan for Chef Lucy. She activates her menu on Foodnome two or three times a week and says that the posts are "random, and so are the menus" (barradepan2020, 2022). Additionally, she does not do "reservations for days in advance or weeks in advance...because I never know if I'll be able to cook. I tend to cook only as I have time" (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). Barra de Pan subverts traditional expectations for what role restaurants and restaurant owners play in the community because its informal model asks for a closer and more patient relationship between chef and customer.

Although it may seem like Chef Lucy has most of the control in deciding what is served, she actually serves dishes that her customers come back the most for. Chef Lucy's most popular recurring nights are her coffee and pizza days. Beyond that, Chef Lucy says that it is her mission to serve food that reminds her clientele of what they ate back from their specific regions in Mexico.

I try to prepare for you a great variety of authentic Mexican meals with the real Mexican flavors, I carefully select genuine and authentic ingredients to add the authenticity and taste to my meals, I personally and quite literally have traveled through almost every state in Mexico to taste the food from each state and obtain those precious key ingredients for the authentic Mexican meals I cook for you and my family. (Barra de Pan, 2022)

This desire to create something authentic resembles the sentiment of "nostalgia and loss" that Appadurai writes about. As he puts it, the cuisine transmitter—Chef Lucy in this case—who now lives outside their home country, "miss in a vague and generalized way" what they think of a

national food (Appadurai, 1998, p. 18). Both the design of the restaurant and Chef Lucy's desire to serve a cuisine that offers Mexican authenticity in an urban city outside of Mexico is an example of Appadurai's argument that the creators of national cuisines often describe cuisines out of a place of nostalgia and loss.

Appadurai discusses the importance of urban women's selection of certain information—they have to decide which aspects of regional foods they will present as a national cuisine. They make these decisions through research and incorporating knowledge from their families. Chef Lucy travels to learn recipes; she explained to me how she visits a new region, and brings ingredients such as coffee, tortillas, spices, and cheeses (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). She says that these things just do not taste the same in the United States. Additionally, she brings back information about how the meals are prepared. According to her, food preparation has more “simplicity” in Mexico (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022). The ingredients that she picks—even though they are reflective of a Mexican identity—come from all over. For example, her Mexican hot chocolate is advertised as being made from “100% Mexican cocoa beans, vanilla extract from Veracruz, cinnamon, a hint of chili powder” (Barra de Pan, 2022). Her other popular dish, “*Enchiladas placeras estilo Michoacan*” is described as “Michoacan style homemade enchiladas filled with Mexican cheese” (Barra de Pan, 2022). Appadurai would be critical of Chef Lucy's menu because it handpicks different regional ingredients, recipes, and practices and mashes them together to create an idea of a “Mexican cuisine.” She is from Tijuana, but she uses Chocolate from Chiapas, vanilla from Veracruz, and the recipes for enchiladas are from Michoacan. He may argue that she is downplaying culinary nuances from each region to present a diverse menu.

Although Appadurai's theory may be critical for understanding Chef Lucy, I believe that Yamashita's theory can be used to explain her manner of representing certain regions in her menu. The cuisine that Chef Lucy is preparing is a cuisine that reflects more accurately the ethnic diversity of Southern California, and less so of Mexico. To some Chicano communities, it is accurate to have a regional hodgepodge of culinary practices on a menu because it reflects the diversity of the community. Chef Lucy is a translocal Chef—she is preparing food that is pulled from her complex identity as an immigrant in the United States and caters to the identities of her customers.

Outside of travel, Lucy's memory of how recipes are prepared comes from her ancestral knowledge. When describing the differences between restaurants in the U.S. and Mexico, Chef Lucy says that they do not serve food with the same care and respect for memory—they take shortcuts, making it less authentic:

And to me, you know, every time I make a plate... I'm thinking, when I did things with my mom...I remember asking my mom, Okay, what are the ingredients that you put in it? I remember making the little balls [*albondigas* - meatballs] so the memory and the connection to the food, it makes me even make it even better, just like she did it. And that is the difference, I guess. (L. Silva, personal communication, Nov 29, 2022)

Whether pulling from her own memory, tradition, or knowledge from travel, Chef Lucy is making a deliberate effort to assemble ingredients that represent the diversity of the Southern California Chicano community—this is what makes her a hyperlocal chef.

Clientele

Since the start of her business in 2019, Chef Lucy has amassed a following of over five thousand Instagram followers and fifty-thousand Foodnome followers. Fans of her food closely monitor

each post so that they can be one of the few dozen that are able to get a reservation before she sells out. While a fully-staffed operation might be able to crank out consistent menus and a high volume of food, Chef Lucy maintains a consistent customer base due to the authenticity of her food. Many of Chef Lucy's clientele are predominantly Mexican-American, coming from all regions of Mexico but sharing the same backgrounds as immigrants in Southern California. Chef Lucy's goal is to serve food that her clients can see themselves in.

I want them to feel like they are eating something that is made special for them," she said, expertly filling and folding tacos on a skillet. "Not only the type of food that is in our country but the type of food that we serve at our own home". (Wagner, 2020)

Her clients do actually feel this way. Looking through her many reviews, you can find dozens that attest to the familiarity of her cooking— "Caldo de Res was delicious, the rice reminded me of my nana's" (Barra de Pan, 2022). Some guests were more passionate— "I CANNOT AND I MEAN CANNOT EXPRESS THE TASTE OF THIS AUTHENTIC REAL MEXICAN FOOD!" (Barra de Pan, 2022). Chef Lucy's backyard restaurant draws its strength from the Mexican-American community and its collective relationship with food.

Barra de Pan does not completely replicate the hyperlocal model, as Chef Lucy does not source her ingredients locally or have a close relationship with her producers. She defines a new sort of hyperlocalism – what I call culinary translocalism. She is translocal (or perhaps - transnational) because she serves food that resembles the local Chicano community. There is no one region that Southern California Chicanos are from, so Chef Lucy represents the local community well by incorporating the many regions of Mexico into her menu. For example, she serves Michoacan-style enchiladas and Chiapas-style hot chocolate, all while being from Tijuana. Her customers seem to appreciate the diversity of the regional dishes she presents as it reminds

them of a style of preparation they may not have eaten since childhood. This connection between her customers, her, and identity speaks as to whether or not Chef Lucy can be a hyperlocal chef.

Chapter IV: Conclusion

MEHKOs are creating a new vision for the restaurant industry in California, replacing traditional restaurants with suburban driveways and Yelp with Instagram menus. In this thesis, I examine the legislative political and the socio-psychological. In 2018, Bill AB-626 established MEHKOs with the aim of economically empowering vulnerable and minority communities, highlighting the fact that most of those in the small food economy are immigrants and people of color. Due to these backgrounds, identity plays a significant role in the food served by MEHKO owners as they express a desire to share the culture and traditions from their home countries. -Food traditions are presented by the cook and interpreted by the diner. Mindful of the dynamic operating within their relationship, I set out to answer the following questions: What is a MEHKO, what do they serve, whom do they serve, and what do they represent?

To answer these questions, I examined news articles that covered the policy's creation and passage and featured those impacted by policy decisions. However, these articles were insufficient for an in-depth understanding, prompting me to interview two MEHKO owners: Guido Totaro and Lucy Silva. Their personal histories and experiences in the food industry proved to be most informative, revealing the significance of their food and their aspirations for their businesses. In addition to these interviews, I reviewed their social media and Foodnome pages to determine whether Guido and Lucy received conventional reviews like regular restaurants and to understand how their customers interacted with their restaurants

I found that MEHKOs are characterized by their small and modest nature. Operating from home has limitations, but MEHKO owners, like Guido and Lucy, embrace these constraints. Coming from diverse backgrounds, they are keen to share their culture with others, emphasizing authenticity and the preservation of cultural heritage in their meals. Their customers are drawn to MEHKOs by their homey element that evokes familiar tastes and cultural memories. Overall,

MEHKOs foster a sense of community and nostalgia. Additionally, they have developed a brand and reputation influenced by policy and startup companies. The main critique of AB-626 is its co-authorship and sponsorship by former tech-industry personnel, who recognize the appeal of this legislation for potentially opportunistic investors keen on collaborating with smaller chefs. Despite these concerns, the influences of politicians and startups have created discussions and communities around MEHKOs, increasing interest in both selling and buying.

In Chapter II, I explored the impact of policy, tracing the evolution of homemade food policies from cottage food laws to Bill AB-626. I argue that both the COVID-19 pandemic and advocacy groups were catalysts for this policy's creation. In Chapter III, I discussed Guido Totaro, who says that AB-626 helped him understand the food industry and who hopes someday to open a brick-and-mortar restaurant. In Chapter IV, I discuss Lucy Silva who chose to open a MEHKO, and not a regular restaurant, because of the intimate cooking and cultural experiences it permitted.

There is virtually no scholarship on MEHKOs partly because the policy is still in its infancy. More statewide quantitative research is needed on the demographics of MEHKO business owners and the policy's impact on their lives. As far as I know, no such studies have been conducted or published yet. Additionally, no research has been done on how MEHKOs affect healthy food access in the communities they serve, despite this being an intended goal of the policy.

As an Environmental Analysis (EA) major, I often hear discussions about sustainability in food stereotypically focusing on eating local produce or becoming vegetarian. Although these topics are important, they do not tell the whole story. I wrote this thesis because I was inspired by how individuals like Guido and Lucy, and other home cooks, open their homes to strangers and share their stories about home and food. To me, their approach to food is sustainable because their

it centers tradition and history and counters the detachment from food present in the commercial food system.

I advise policymakers and advocacy groups to be cautious of gig-economy apps that attempt to commercialize the businesses of these chefs. Cooks should be able to grow their businesses while being protected from predatory fees and unfair business practices. When startup apps dominate the conversation about MEHKOs, they risk commodifying these chefs' home businesses. I hope my work gives voice to the experiences of home cooks who have been impacted by this new policy.

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