

THE START-UP COMPANY IS ONE OF SEVERAL INITIATIVES ACROSS THE COUNTRY APPEALING TO THE APPETITES OF AMERICANS AND GIVING REFUGEES OPPORTUNITIES TO MAKE A LIVING



Manal Kahi, co-founder of Eat Offbeat. – Reuters

In US, refugees cook to win over hearts, minds and stomachs

SEBASTIEN MALO

Beaming with pride, a Nepalese refugee in the kitchen of a New York caterer holds up cauliflower florets she has steamed, battered and fried, part of a cooking repertoire she says earns her a living and keeps her spirits up. At home in Kathmandu, explains Rachana, who did not want to give her full name, cooking once brought her pleasure as she fed her family delicacies from recipes inherited from her mother.

Then political violence struck, leaving a close relative dead and forcing her to flee the country.

Now her happiness returns, she says, when she prepares traditional specialties for Eat Offbeat, a New York food company where refugees make and deliver ethnic fare.

The start-up company is one of several initiatives across the country appealing to the appetites of Americans and giving refugees opportunities to make a living.

Others are located in California, Utah and Texas.

"It's a very, very good feeling when people come to eat my food, and they talk about how it is so good," Rachana said, clad in a white apron.

On a recent day in the company's kitchen, she paced between a counter and stove top where oil heated for the cauliflower, to be served with a tangy tomato and tamari sauce flavoured with the herb fenugreek.

Although the cauliflower is a Chinese dish, Rachana, 53, said she developed her own version in Nepal. "From the age of 16 years old I've been cooking," she said.

A half dozen refugees have found work at Eat Offbeat.

Until Rachana became a full-time chef, she scraped by for nearly a decade in New York, speaking no English at first and taking odd jobs.



Chef Satakshi Rimal makes traditional Nepalese dumplings



Dhuha Jasim, a refugee from Iraq

Now she tells other Eat Offbeat workers: "Don't worry, you can get whatever you like here. This is America."

Countering hostility

Initiatives such as Eat Offbeat can serve as counterpoint to anti-immigration sentiment, their proponents say.

The US presidential race has been marked by candidates in the Republican

Party calling for immigrants to be kept out and for those in the country to be sent back to their homelands.

A plan by President Barack Obama to admit some 10,000 Syrian refugees has been met with resistance by many politicians and pundits.

Despite the at-times hostile context, Eat Offbeat has found success through its tantalizing tastes and hard work, said

co-founder Wissam Kahi.

It received more than 1,200 orders since a soft launch in November.

A smartphone app to take orders is in the works and expanding to other cities is a possibility, he said.

"[The refugees] are bringing a skill to this country and they are contributing," he said.

"They don't necessarily have to be a burden. It could be the opposite.

They bring a lot of value," added his sister Manal Kahi, also a co-founder.

Across the country at the Spice Kitchen Incubator in Salt Lake City, Utah, refugees from Somalia and Iraq also are learning the food business.

Among them is Nour, who moved to the United States less than a year ago to escape the civil war in Syria and has astonished organizers with his talents.

He, like Rachana, asked to be named by his first name only to protect family members.

"His food is exceptional," said Grace Henley, who manages the Spice Kitchen programme for the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a humanitarian aid organization. The IRC runs Spice Kitchen and offers help to Eat Offbeat, which is private.

At Spice Kitchen, Nour has dubbed one dish "East meets West," fusing rice, chicken and beef with Syrian spices and Tex-Mex flavours to reflect his move to the American West from Damascus.

"All this food diversity in our community makes it a more interesting place to live," Henley said. "It makes it a more delicious place to live."

Still, some refugee culinary projects have met resistance. At Eat Offbeat this year, a handful of hate mails saying "go home, stay there, make America great again" came to the company, its Lebanese co-founders said.

The messages prompted the owners to remove the company's street address from its website. "Nothing serious, but better to be on the safe side," Wissam Kahi said.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation



DR SIVA KUMAR
doctsh@gmail.com

The Art and Science of Sleeping

Karan loves sleeping — he'll sleep for hours, even days at a time. I'm sure anyone seeing him sleeping so deeply and contentedly would find themselves drifting off the next moment. I was very curious to know how he manages himself in the classroom during his lessons. He was rather reluctant to tell me, fearing that his teachers would find out, but after I'd made several requests and finally promised not to say anything about it within earshot of his school, he revealed his successful sleeping techniques:

1. Choose a good place to sit where neither the teacher nor the other students will notice you, but keep a good friend nearby to wake you up when needed.
2. Drop a pencil on the floor 'accidentally' and place your right arm along the desk's edge. Bend forward as if looking for the pencil, while also folding your left arm on the desk and resting your forehead on it. One should avoid 'searching' in this pose for the whole 40 minutes as it may invite the teacher's attention.
3. Place a book on your lap and put your head down on the desk. Don't forget to keep your right hand on the pages as if reading.
4. Use your hands to shield your closed eyes like a sun-visor. This method requires diligent practice as your hands may 'fall asleep' and expose closed eyes.
5. If you are lucky in computer class, you will have the monitor in front of you hiding your eyes from the teacher. Open a very important webpage, place one hand on the mouse and the other on the keyboard and gradually fall asleep.

Many people worry about excessive sleeping when they come to know that we spend one-third of our lives unconscious. Shakespeare termed slumber as 'chief nourisher in life's feast' or 'balm of hurt minds'. Early 'sleep scientists' were under the impression that sleep was just blood retreating from the surface of the skin. Therefore, the aim of 'sleep science' at that time was to cure sleepiness.

After 10 rats sacrificed their lives when they were deprived of sleep for a month in a 1989 study, conducted by Carol Everson, first-time sleep scientists woke up to the exact benefits of sleep. This paradigm shift caused sleep scientists many a sleepless night while trying to find better ways to doze.

There are many people, unlike Karan, who are unable to sleep at night even after counting sheep, cows, chickens, the whole farmyard, singing 'Old MacDonald had a farm' and 'Hey Macarena'. It is really sad to know that there are people who cannot catch forty winks even after switching off the Internet.

It has been scientifically proved that sleep is a vital biological process that can affect our physiological system in many ways:

- The central nervous system: lack of sleep negatively affects functions of the brain including memory, emotion and primary regulation of appetite.
- Immune system: sleep deprivation can leave our immune system compromised and unable to fight off illnesses effectively.
- Endocrine system: without enough sleep, the body becomes less sensitive to the hormone insulin which increases the risk of developing obesity.

Today's sleep scientists, therefore, advise people to have sufficient sleep in order to maintain a healthy immune system; proper hormonal balance; good emotional and psychiatric health; and effective learning and memory.

There are more than 50 studies that prove a reduction in the amount of sleep can lead to weight gain — contradictory to what many may think. A recent study demonstrated that sleep can even clear toxins from our brain. It has also been established that sleep deprivation reminds us of the negative events in our life, which slowly may lead to depression.

So next time, before waking up someone from their sleep, please give it a second thought.

It is very strange to know that at one end of the spectrum there are people like Karan, who can sleep anywhere at anytime, and at the other end there are people struggling to find ways to just get a few hours sleep at night. It reminds me of what Ogden Nash once said:

"The bed is a bundle of paradoxes: we go to it with reluctance, yet we quit it with regret; we make up our minds every night to leave it early, but we make up our bodies every morning to keep it late."

KITCHEN

Cooker hoods may be eye-catching, but check how they work



JULIANE MATTHEY

Modern cooker hoods have developed from being very utilitarian machines for the kitchen to bells-and-whistles, high-tech devices with ambitions to be stylistically stunning.

Think of a UFO-like object hovering above the cooker, rather than a simple metallic intake for fumes.

While the designs have definitely got fancy, it's still the technical details that set the latest hoods apart from each other. "The main decision when buying a hood is whether it should extract air or recirculate it in the kitchen," says Claudia Oberascher from Initiative Hausgeraete Plus, an independent German organization that provides advice and information on household appliances.

A typical extractor hood removes cooking fumes and vents them to the outside, whereas a recirculating hood filters the air free from grease

and odours and sends the air back into the kitchen. "Hoods that expel air outside are more energy-efficient and powerful," says Oberascher. They are also usually quieter.

But the disadvantage with extractor hoods is that they are more expensive and require more time to install. They need access to the outside, which might mean a loss of either heat or air-conditioned chill.

You will also need to make sure that any fumes expelled outside won't disturb your neighbours.

Recirculating cooker hoods, on the other hand, are much simpler to install and you don't have to change the structure of your house by installing conduits, which explains why they are cheaper.

But the big drawback is that moisture remains in the kitchen and you still have to open a window occasionally to bring in fresh air. The filter inside the hood makes it less efficient and noisier too.

There are several other things to decide before buying a cooker hood. Do you want one for the wall, one that hangs from the ceiling or one that's integrated into the cooking hob and disappears under it when not in use?

Hoods that hang above a cooking island are an attractive and eye-catching addition to a kitchen. But usually they are recirculating hoods, according to Kirk Mangels from Germany's trade association of the kitchen industry, AMK. Cooking island hoods also need to be big, as there is much more air circulating beneath them.

Both Mangels and Oberascher recommend buying one that extends at least 10 centimetres beyond the cooking hob. Hoods can also be built into a ceiling, far above the stove. The most practical sort however are modular types that either fit inside a standard-sized wall cupboard of your fitted kitchen, directly over the hob. Modules can also be slung under such a cupboard.

Because they are only 50 or 60 centimetres

from the cooker, they catch most fumes before they can disperse in the room. The disadvantage is that the cupboard obstructs your view of the pots.

Hoods that hang directly on a wall are very practical because they don't project so far and won't block the view of what you're cooking. The same applies to cross-draft hoods that are installed beside the hob. They are also usually the recirculating type.

"The most effective type of hood is the classic wall hood," says Mangels, because cooking fumes naturally rise upwards. Every type of hood has an energy efficiency rating in the European Union, depending on how much power it uses, and the labels will often remain attached when hoods are sold in non-European markets. The scale goes from A+ at the most efficient end of the spectrum to F Power is used to drive the motor and light the cooking area. However, compared to other household appliances, cooker hoods don't use a huge amount of electricity. — dpa