

## **Final Report for PIG: Developing a New Pedagogical Field and Course “History, Politics, and Food in the Middle East”**

### **Participants:**

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**Duration of Study:** August 2022-May 2023

**Pedagogical Goal:** Launching a new food course in an area outside of my expertise.

Elle Palmer, who plans on majoring in Politics and SAMES, researched food history with me, Elyse Semerdjian, during the academic year 2022-2023. We read and discussed works on Middle East food history evaluating them for their pedagogical value. We found that the scholarship was in some cases quite vast and included books on food and climate change that had value for discussing the precarity of the MENA region. We were able to connect with the local agriculture of southwest Washington, which includes the production of chickpeas, lentils, wheat, lamb, and goats. Among the local producers we contacted was Blue Mountain Seed Company which we learned has been using chickpeas to restore the soil in the region, since chickpeas pour nitrogen into the soil and are rotated with wheat and dry peas in a three year cycle. Some of the beans grown in this region are exported to the Middle East but also to India and Pakistan. The war in Ukraine has exposed these transnational dependencies, especially as the absence of Ukrainian harvests are expected to send parts of Asia and Africa into famine. These connections, war and climate change, with local agriculture can make food an important gateway to thinking about larger issues.

These are some of the tasks we performed:

- Buy key texts for possible course adoption
- Read and discuss debates and literature in the field of Middle East food studies, but also works in the broader field of food studies
- Food trials—We used cook books to determine which recipes we would be using in the course. We also thought that each week could cover a different food—bread, chickpeas, meat, and that there could be a session devoted to Christian, Muslim, and Jewish holidays. I was planning on

teaching the course in the Spring so that we could prepare Easter breads and a Seder meal in collaboration with the Synagogue (I was set to meet Richard Middleton-Kaplan about this idea but called it off when I realized I would be leaving Whitman).

- A new coffeeshop Carte Coffee opened up downtown last fall and the owner is very interested in the history of coffee. We had an arrangement that the owner, Ryan offered to visit our class on the day we spoke of the history of coffee and offer a “cupping” or series of coffee tastings while we discussed the history of coffee. Ryan is basically a sommelier of coffee and is able to discuss the tastes and features of coffee in a way that most lay people cannot.

- Research the products developing in the Walla Walla valley and where they are being exported

We discussed cooking spaces on campus, where could a classroom of 15-20 people cook. We did think that a 3 hour class time slot was best for a course like that since some cooking would be involved in set days (though not every session). We did not plan much further when it appeared that I, Elyse, would be quitting my job at Whitman. While this research will not manifest in a new course at Whitman as intended, Elle does want to continue food research for a potential final theses in the SAMES major.

Note from student Elle Palmer:

I worked with Professor Semerdjian to develop a course on foodways and politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) during the 2022-2023 academic year. During this time, we engaged with materials that attended to different facets of food culture, history, production, and trade. This included reading and discussing books on Halal cuisine (Armanios and Ergene, *Halal Food*), food’s ideological and political significance (Parasecoli, *Gastronativism*), and how environmental and consumption patterns influence security and sustainability (Cribb, *Food or War*). We then incorporated this research into the kitchen, where we prepared historically and culturally relevant dishes. Our goal was to curate a dynamic syllabus that paired “traditional” text-based learning with hands-on culinary experiences, a holistic approach that facilitates deeper engagement with course materials.

Although our research was focused on the Middle East and North Africa, Professor Semerdjian and I sought to connect international foodways with our southeastern Washington milieu. This integrative approach was designed to familiarize students with the local food geography while facilitating awareness of the interconnectedness and interdependency of global food systems. Framing our course through a global lens was intended to cultivate a deeper understanding of modern foodways while challenging the idea that cuisine and culture

develop within discrete borders. To facilitate our goal of a transcontinental curriculum, we were able to establish relationships with several local producers and artisans who have experience with and knowledge of MENA foodways.

Gary Ferrel, a second-generation farmer and president of Blue Mountain Seed Company, taught us about the importance of chickpeas and lentils (both native to Western Asia) to soil health in the Columbia Basin region. These crops regenerate the soil by enriching it with nitrogen, which is depleted by wheat production, one of the most prevalent crops in the area. Chickpeas and other legumes cultivated locally are traded abroad, where drought, flooding, and poor yield have created food deserts in areas throughout the Middle East and South Asia. These conditions have been exacerbated by past and present wars and climate change. Although the United States currently lags behind India, Turkey, and Russia in chickpea production, this order is likely to change radically in the coming years due to harsh environmental conditions, fallout from the recent earthquakes, and trade sanctions. Mr. Ferrel expressed interest in guest lecturing a class, as well as coordinating a visit to BMSC's farm or processing facilities.

Expanding on research I conducted throughout the spring 2021 semester, Professor Semerdjian and I met with Ryan Vigil, co-owner of Carte Coffee, to discuss the history of coffee cultivation and commerce. The second most traded commodity in the world after oil, coffee was first consumed as a brewed beverage in Yemen during the fifteenth century. Ryan is a licensed and calibrated Q Grader (the coffee equivalent of a sommelier) who has undergone rigorous training to learn the history and characteristics of coffee beans (the Q Grader exam consists of 22 tests spanning six-days). Ryan and his business partner Joshua Huh recently opened a brick and mortar shop in downtown Walla Walla and agreed to host our class for a guided tasting to complement our lesson on coffee.

Over spring break, Professor Semerdjian and I traveled to New York City, where we were able to conduct more intensive and thorough research than possible in Walla Walla. During our trip, Professor Semerdjian and I visited the remnants of Little Syria, a historic Manhattan neighborhood that was home to the first Arab American community in New York. Although diminished, many original institutions remain intact, including Sahadi's, a fifth-generation family owned and operated market recently featured in *The New York Times* that was originally established by Ottoman Syrian immigrants. Professor Semerdjian and I visited several museums and were able to interface with historical artifacts that documented MENA food history and consumption patterns from ancient times to the modern day. We were additionally able to refine the culinary aspect of our pedagogy by going to several NYC restaurants established by members of the MENA diaspora community. On these occasions, we were introduced to new flavors and techniques which highlighted the blend of heritage and syncretism that defines

many diasporic cuisines. These experiences served to reify readings and discussions in ways not previously attainable.

Although Professor Semerdjian has accepted a new position, I plan to continue the research we have conducted over the past year. My hope is that parts of our work will influence one of my theses (Politics or SAMES). Food and Middle East history/politics are both passions of mine, and I have dedicated extensive time to independent study and experimentation. Having the opportunity to research alongside Professor Semerdjian has been invaluable to my growth as a scholar and has nurtured my interest in becoming an academic myself. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to conduct this research alongside Professor Semerdjian, especially on a topic that I believe constitutes a diverse and deeply relevant but understudied facet of Middle East history.