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Refugee Chefs, Tastes of Home

Using food to change the way immigrants are perceived in France.

By ALISSA J. RUBIN

Paris — The guests at this Left Bank bistro squirmed at the unexpected dishes on the menu on a recent evening: puree of orange lentils, lambek and apricots; rack of lamb marinated with sweet peppers and tahini; quail served with freshok, a grain found in the eastern Mediterranean.

It was far from the usual fare at *Le Petit Jean*, a traditional French bistro, whose 65-year-old chef and owner, Stéphane Jégo, is known for his interpretations of Basque cuisine.

But on that night, if the guests had looked into the kitchen, they would have seen two chefs tending to each dish: Mr. Jégo and Mohammad El Khady, a Syrian who worked for 20 years as a cook in his native Damascus until he was forced to flee the bombing.

"Cooking is my work, it's my life," Mr. Khady said.

He looked almost euphoric as he checked on his and Mr. Jégo's pots of sautéed lambek on the restaurant stove and lined up the metal containers filled with neat piles of washed, trimmed parsley and cilantro ready to be deployed as garnishes.

"We are making a taste that is from Syria, but in the French style," he said as Mr. Jégo nodded approvingly.

The restaurant is one of nine venues that offered to showcase a refugee chef for the first *Refugee Food Festival* in Paris. Mr. Khady participated along with eight other refugee chefs, most drawn from an organization that worked with the food festival: Les Cousins Migrateurs or the Migratory Cooks.

Les Cousins Migrateurs is a bold new venture created by two intrepid French entrepreneurs who are trying to change the way Parisians view immigrants by introducing the French to the best of the newcomers' home cuisines. The entrepreneurs, Louis Jacques and Sébastien Prunier, both 26, cracked down trained chefs who were among the thousands who recently obtained asylum in France; they then gathered a small group to form a catering company specializing in lesser-known cuisines.

With three Syrians, a Chechen, an Iranian, an Indian, an Ethiopian and a Sri Lankan (an Afghan and a Tibetan are auditioning in the next few days), the organizers have already got on 20 events since February, including lunches, dinners and buffets, in a industry where the dominant narrative is that refugees live off the state and are a burden on the society, and where French cuisine dominates the food scene, the *NY Times* on food 20.

Top, Stéphane Jégo, left, and Mohammad El Khady in the kitchen of *Le Petit Jean*, a bistro in the Left Bank that Mr. Jégo owns.



Fouad Al Mhanna, a Syrian refugee, who helps with preparation and cleanup in the kitchen of *Le Petit Jean*.



Sarah, who did not give her last name for fear of reprisals, learned to cook while working for a Kuwaiti family.



Patricia Isakovic learned to cook from her grandmother and her mother, who ran a restaurant in Chechnya.