

Refugee Gastronomy and Sustainable Development: The Case of Gaziantep

Mülteci Gastronomisi ve Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma: Gaziantep Örneği

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Article info

Keywords:

Food, Sociology, Refugees, Culture, Sustainable Development.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Gıda, Sosyoloji, Mülteciler, Kültür, Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma.

Received: 13.05.2025

Accepted: 17.06.2025

E-ISSN: 2979-9511

DOI: 10.58625/jfng-2874

İncetahtacı Günal; Refugee Gastronomy and Sustainable Development: The Case of Gaziantep

Available online at <https://jfng.toros.edu.tr>

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Abstract

Objective: This study investigates the relationship between refugee gastronomy and sustainable development, focusing specifically on Syrian-owned food enterprises in Gaziantep, Turkey. It aims to understand how refugee-led culinary practices contribute to economic participation, cultural sustainability, social inclusion, and urban resilience within host communities.

Method: The research draws on key sociological concepts—such as Bourdieu’s *cultural capital*, Bhabha’s *hybridity*, and Appadurai’s *gastro-politics*—to develop a conceptual framework. Quantitative data were collected on 975 Syrian-owned businesses in Gaziantep, of which 203 operate in food-related sectors, including restaurants, bakeries, and cafes.

Results: The findings reveal that refugee-led culinary initiatives promote cross-cultural interaction, create employment opportunities, and strengthen community ties. These enterprises often facilitate gender-inclusive entrepreneurship and the preservation of culturally embedded food practices. The integration of refugee cuisine into local foodscapes also contributes to mutual understanding and community cohesion.

Conclusion: The study demonstrates that gastronomy functions not only as a site of cultural expression but also as a strategic vector for integration and sustainability. By aligning these practices with Sustainable Development Goals 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and 12 (Responsible Consumption and

Production), the research highlights the transformative potential of food in fostering inclusive economic development and multicultural urban integration. The Gaziantep case illustrates how refugee gastronomy can enrich both local economies and social fabrics, offering a replicable model for other urban contexts.

Özet

Amaç: Bu çalışma, mülteci gastronomisi ile sürdürülebilir kalkınma arasındaki ilişkiyi araştırmakta ve özellikle Gaziantep'teki Suriyeli mültecilere ait gıda işletmelerine odaklanmaktadır. Araştırmanın amacı, mülteci öncülüğünde yürütülen mutfak pratiklerinin ev sahibi toplumlarda ekonomik katılım, kültürel sürdürülebilirlik, sosyal kapsayıcılık ve kentsel dayanıklılığa nasıl katkı sağladığını anlamaktır.

Yöntem: Araştırma, Bourdieu'nün kültürel sermaye, Bhabha'nın melezlik ve Appadurai'nin gastro-politika kavramları gibi temel sosyolojik yaklaşımlardan yararlanarak kavramsal bir çerçeve geliştirmiştir. Gaziantep'te 975 Suriyeli mülteciye ait işletmeye ilişkin nicel veriler toplanmış, bunlardan 203'ünün restoran, pastane ve kafe gibi gıda sektörlerinde faaliyet gösterdiği belirlenmiştir.

Bulgular: Elde edilen bulgular, mülteci öncülüğündeki gastronomi girişimlerinin kültürlerarası etkileşimi teşvik ettiğini, istihdam yarattığını ve toplumsal bağları güçlendirdiğini göstermektedir. Bu işletmeler, toplumsal cinsiyete duyarlı girişimciliği desteklemekte ve kültürel olarak köklü gıda pratiklerinin korunmasına katkıda bulunmaktadır. Mülteci mutfaklarının yerel gastronomiyle bütünleşmesi, karşılıklı anlayışı artırmakta ve toplumsal uyumu pekiştirmektedir.

Sonuç: Bu çalışma, gastronominin yalnızca kültürel bir ifade biçimi değil, aynı zamanda toplumsal uyum ve sürdürülebilirlik için stratejik bir araç olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu uygulamaların Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Amaçları olan (İnsana Yakışır İş ve Ekonomik Büyüme 8), (Eşitsizliklerin Azaltılması 10), (Sürdürülebilir Şehirler ve Topluluklar 11) ve (Sorumlu Tüketim ve Üretim 12) ile örtüştüğü görülmektedir. Gaziantep örneği, mülteci gastronomisinin hem yerel ekonomiyi hem de toplumsal dokuyu zenginleştirme potansiyeline sahip olduğunu ve bu modelin diğer kentsel bağlamlarda da uygulanabilir olduğunu göstermektedir.

INTRODUCTION

The global refugee population has surged to 120 million due to wars, population growth, famine and economic instability. Over the last year, the number of refugees increased by 8.8%, with real figures likely surpassing official estimates. As it is anticipated that many societies will face similar migration challenges in the future, the integration of refugees into settled communities has become an essential issue. Approximately 80% of refugees are unable to return to their home countries, making their integration into host societies imperative. Throughout history, successful and developed societies have capitalized on the human and cultural resources brought by refugees, fostering rapid development.

Gastronomy emerges as a powerful tool in this integration process, transcending cultural barriers and building bridges between refugees and local communities. As a deeply cultural practice, it offers a platform for everyday encounters between refugees and host communities. This interaction can be examined through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (1), which highlights the value of embodied knowledge—such as culinary skills—as a resource that individuals can mobilize to gain recognition and inclusion. Refugees bring with them not only ingredients and recipes but also culinary techniques, rituals, and symbolic meanings associated with food. These resources contribute to the enrichment of local gastronomic landscapes and create pathways for social participation. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of embodied cultural capital, culinary knowledge carried by refugees—often acquired through family, tradition, and practice—functions as a social resource that facilitates their participation and visibility in host societies. Through the culinary traditions they bring, refugees not only preserve their cultural identity but also contribute to the sustainability of this heritage within their new societies. This interaction fosters cultural and social sustainability by creating opportunities for social integration through shared culinary experiences.

Interactions and exchanges in gastronomy and

food techniques between refugees and local people can have significant cultural, social and economic benefits. Here are some ways in which these interactions can take place;

- i) Cultural exchange: Gastronomy is deeply rooted in culture and traditions. When refugees and local people come together to share their culinary knowledge and techniques, it creates an opportunity for cultural exchange. Refugees can introduce their traditional dishes, flavors and cooking methods, while locals can share their own culinary heritage. This exchange promotes understanding, appreciation and respect for different cultures;
- ii) Skill sharing: Refugees often bring unique culinary skills and techniques from their home countries. By sharing these skills with local communities, they can contribute to the local food scene and provide an opportunity for locals to learn new cooking techniques, ingredients and flavors. This exchange of culinary knowledge can enrich the local culinary landscape and provide economic opportunities for both refugees and locals;
- iii) Community integration: Food has a way of bringing people together. Collaborative cooking activities or community events that involve refugees and locals can foster social integration and create a sense of belonging. Through these interactions, refugees and locals can form meaningful connections, break down cultural barriers and build supportive networks;
- iv) Economic empowerment: Refugee communities often face economic challenges when they first arrive in a new country. By sharing their culinary skills and traditional cuisines, refugees can create opportunities for entrepreneurship and economic empowerment. This can be achieved through starting food businesses, participating in farmers' markets or food festivals, or even offering cooking classes to the local community. These initiatives can help refugees gain financial independence and contribute to the local economy;
- v) Culinary fusion: When refugees and locals interact in the realm of gastronomy, it often leads to culinary fusion, where traditional dishes from different cultures blend together to create unique and exciting flavors. This fusion cuisine not only reflects the diversity of the community but also creates new culinary experiences that can be appreciated by all.

Such exchanges also generate hybrid culinary forms, reflecting Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity (2), where elements of refugee and host cuisines merge to form new, culturally layered practices. As Homi Bhabha suggests, hybridity emerges in spaces of cultural encounter, producing new meanings that destabilize binary notions of self and other. Refugee cuisine exemplifies this, as local and migrant culinary elements fuse to create hybrid forms of cultural expression. The blending of ingredients, preparation methods, and consumption styles results in culinary expressions that go beyond binary distinctions of "local" and "foreign." This process of hybridization not only expands culinary diversity but also serves as a metaphor for the negotiation of belonging, identity, and cultural transformation.

At the same time, food functions as a space of negotiation and symbolic power, as described in Arjun Appadurai's concept of gastro-politics (3). The act of cooking, sharing, and consuming food involves more than sustenance—it is embedded in questions of visibility, agency, and inclusion. Refugees who engage in gastronomy-based entrepreneurship—such as running restaurants, food stalls, or catering services—actively participate in shaping public tastes, narratives, and perceptions, thereby contributing to the sociocultural fabric of their host environments.

Recent empirical examples illustrate the multifaceted role of gastronomy in integration dynamics. In Germany, the widespread adoption of döner kebab—originally introduced by Turkish migrants and popularized further by refugee entrepreneurship—demonstrates how food can transform from a cultural marker of difference to a symbol of national identity. Similarly, in Turkey, the arrival of Syrian refugees has significantly influenced the local food scene. Syrian-owned cafés, sweet shops, bakeries, and restaurants have become part of everyday urban life, especially in cities like Gaziantep and Istanbul. These establishments offer more than culinary products; they serve as social spaces where interaction, recognition, and exchange take place.

Notably, this process is not confined to

private initiatives. Governmental and non-governmental actors, including NGOs and international agencies, have recognized the integrative potential of gastronomy. In Turkey, organizations such as the Foundation for the Support of Women's Work (KEDV) have been instrumental in facilitating refugee women's participation in the food economy (4). KEDV has supported the formation of multi-ethnic women's cooperatives in cities like Gaziantep and Istanbul, where Syrian and Turkish women work together to produce and sell traditional food products. These cooperatives offer not only income-generating opportunities, but also spaces of solidarity and social inclusion, where women share stories, culinary knowledge, and emotional support. Through training programs, access to commercial kitchens, and support for branding and marketing, KEDV helps women move from informal labor to formal entrepreneurship. Projects involving intercultural cooking workshops, community kitchens, and refugee-led food cooperatives exemplify how food can be utilized as a deliberate tool for social cohesion and empowerment. Such efforts also align with broader frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in promoting decent work, reducing inequalities, and fostering inclusive communities. Additionally, providing access to commercial kitchens, mentorship programs and business development support can help refugees turn their culinary skills into sustainable livelihoods.

In this context, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a globally recognized framework for understanding and addressing interconnected challenges related to poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and social inclusion. As a universal agenda adopted by 193 UN member states, the SDGs not only set measurable targets but also emphasize the need for integrated and inclusive approaches that transcend disciplinary and sectoral boundaries. This study engages with the SDGs not as an external add-on, but as a meaningful analytical lens through which to examine how refugee-led food practices contribute to sustainable urban life, economic empowerment, and cultural resilience. In particular, the research

aligns with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), all of which intersect in the everyday spaces where food is produced, shared, and consumed.

Overall, interactions and exchanges in gastronomy and food techniques between refugees and local people have the potential to foster cultural understanding, social integration, economic empowerment and culinary innovation. By embracing diversity and celebrating the richness of different food traditions, communities can create a more inclusive and vibrant gastronomic landscape.

In sum, refugee gastronomy operates at the intersection of culture, economy, and politics. It not only facilitates cultural sustainability and mutual understanding but also offers tangible opportunities for participation, resilience, and shared growth. When supported by inclusive policies and community engagement, it becomes a medium through which integration is lived, experienced, and continually redefined.

This study aims to investigate how refugee-led culinary practices—particularly those shaped by the Syrian community in Turkey—contribute to social integration and cultural sustainability in host societies. In doing so, it situates food not only as a medium of survival or heritage but also as a transformative tool within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, this research highlights the intersections between refugee gastronomy and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). By analyzing empirical cases and drawing on cultural theory, the paper explores how food-related practices open up spaces for recognition, participation, and sustainable development in increasingly diverse urban environments.

Theoretical Framework

Food plays a pivotal role in the processes of adaptation and integration for refugees, functioning as both a marker of human identity

and a vehicle of cultural expression (5). Culinary practices enable displaced individuals not only to maintain a sense of continuity with their homeland but also to construct new forms of belonging in their host societies. As migrants and refugees navigate new environments, their dietary habits often undergo modification due to changes in availability, affordability, or cultural expectations. This process—frequently involving altered preparation techniques and the substitution of ingredients—is more than a matter of nutrition; it reflects deeper negotiations of identity and cultural continuity (6).

These culinary shifts often give rise to what Abbots (7) describes as hybridization—a blending of migrant and host food cultures. Migrant dishes are no longer consumed in isolation but are served alongside, or fused with, local meals. This culinary interweaving illustrates Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity, wherein cultural boundaries become porous and new, shared identities emerge. The exchange of culinary skills and tastes is not a one-way process of assimilation but a dynamic interaction that can enrich both communities.

Furthermore, food functions as a platform for building social capital, as explored in the work of Long and Ager (8). Their research underscores the capacity of food-centered interactions to create networks of trust, reciprocity, and mutual recognition between refugees, migrants, and host populations. These everyday encounters—whether through shared meals, food festivals, or local market exchanges—contribute to social cohesion and collective resilience.

In the context of the United States, Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (9) emphasize how gastronomic practices serve as a medium through which refugees establish social connections and adapt to unfamiliar cultural landscapes. Through the preparation and sharing of food, refugees assert cultural agency and participate in the co-creation of community. Likewise, Carballo-Cruz and Saenz De Jubera (10), in their study of Spain, demonstrate that gastronomy can operate as a deliberate tool of integration, fostering cross-cultural understanding and challenging stereotypes through interpersonal exchange.

Together, these studies demonstrate that refugee gastronomy is not simply about food—it is about recognition, participation, and transformation. Culinary practices enable refugees to assert their presence in society, negotiate belonging, and contribute to a shared cultural future. These dynamics resonate closely with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (1), as refugees draw upon culinary knowledge not only for survival but also for social mobility, visibility, and symbolic integration into their new environments.

The role of food in social integration can be analyzed through various theoretical lenses. One such framework is Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (1), which posits that cultural knowledge, including culinary skills, can be a form of social currency that helps individuals navigate and integrate into new social environments. For refugees, their culinary traditions represent a significant form of cultural capital that can be leveraged to gain acceptance and establish connections within their host communities. This concept of capital refers to non-economic forms of capital—such as knowledge, skills, education, and cultural habits—that enable individuals to navigate and gain recognition in social spaces. In the context of refugee integration, culinary knowledge and gastronomic practices can be understood as forms of embodied cultural capital. Refugees carry with them a repertoire of culinary techniques, ingredients, recipes, and food-related rituals, which may serve not only as sources of personal identity but also as tools for building social relationships in the host society. Through food preparation, presentation, and consumption, refugees make their cultural capital visible and potentially exchangeable, contributing to their symbolic and practical integration.

This perspective frames food as more than sustenance; it becomes a medium of social positioning, community participation, and economic opportunity. Refugee-led culinary enterprises—such as restaurants, bakeries, or catering businesses—demonstrate how cultural capital can be mobilized in new settings to foster inclusion, economic empowerment, and intercultural dialogue.

Another relevant theory is Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity (2), which describes the process by which immigrant cultures blend with local cultures to create new, hybrid identities. In the context of refugee gastronomy, hybridity is evident in the fusion cuisines that emerge when traditional refugee dishes are adapted to incorporate local ingredients and tastes. This process not only enriches the culinary landscape but also symbolizes the blending of cultural identities, facilitating social integration and mutual understanding. Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity highlights how cultural identities are not fixed but are constantly negotiated and redefined through contact and interaction. In the case of refugee gastronomy, hybridity is often observed in the creation of fusion cuisines—where traditional dishes are adapted using local ingredients or cooking methods, resulting in new culinary forms that blend elements of both migrant and host cultures.

These hybrid dishes are not merely gastronomic inventions; they reflect deeper processes of identity negotiation, cultural adaptation, and mutual influence. They serve as everyday representations of cultural coexistence and can help soften social boundaries by offering familiar yet novel food experiences to locals. Hybridity, in this sense, facilitates cultural recognition and reduces the perceived "otherness" of refugee communities.

Arjun Appadurai's notion of "gastro-politics" further expands the discussion by emphasizing how food can serve as a site of political and social negotiation (3). In line with Arjun Appadurai's concept of gastro-politics, food is not merely sustenance but a medium through which power, identity, and belonging are contested and negotiated—especially for marginalized populations like refugees. In refugee contexts, the act of sharing and consuming food becomes a form of dialogue, where power dynamics, cultural values and social boundaries are negotiated and potentially redefined. Arjun Appadurai's concept of gastro-politics considers food as a site where social relations, power dynamics, and cultural values are actively negotiated. In contexts of migration and displacement, food

becomes a medium through which refugees assert agency, articulate identity, and engage in symbolic and material negotiations with the host society.

Gastro-politics highlights the political dimension of food: who cooks, who serves, who eats, and under what conditions. When refugees establish food businesses or participate in food-related events, they are not only feeding people but also shaping public perceptions, challenging stereotypes, and asserting their place within the cultural and economic life of the host society. Culinary practices thus become acts of both survival and resistance, shaping the everyday politics of belonging.

The Role of Food in Adaptation and Integration

As mentioned previously, there is a strong link between human identity and culture due to critical role of food in the adaptation and integration of refugees (5). As refugees adapt to their new environments, their culinary practices evolve, blending their traditional techniques with local influences (6). This fusion results in hybridized culinary practices that reflect both migrant and host cultures, enriching the local food landscape and creating new gastronomic experiences (7).

The culinary contributions of refugees, exemplified by baklava shops and döner vendors, expand the diversity of local cuisine while promoting social interaction and cultural understanding. An emerging symbol of multicultural refugee cuisine could be "hummus," a notable dish increasingly used as a vehicle for integration. These businesses serve as platforms for cultural exchange, where locals and refugees share and learn from each other's culinary heritage, thereby fostering mutual respect and appreciation (8). Gastronomical businesses such as baklava and döner shops established by refugees expand the local culinary landscape, enhance diversity, promote social interaction and deepen cultural understanding. These interactions not only enrich the existing social fabric but also play a crucial role in building a sustainable future. The contributions of refugees in the field of gastronomy significantly

bolster local economies, increase employment and help establish peaceful relations between different communities.

In the modern landscape of global migration, food plays a pivotal role in cultural integration and identity formation. One of the most striking examples of refugee gastronomic influence can be observed in Germany, where döner kebabs have become a staple of the local diet. Introduced by Turkish immigrants, many of whom were refugees or guest workers, döner shops have proliferated across Germany, to the point where they have become an integral part of German street food culture. The widespread popularity of döner kebabs highlights the successful integration of Turkish refugees into German society, demonstrating how food can serve as a bridge between cultures. The presence of these shops has not only enriched the German culinary landscape but has also facilitated social interactions between Germans and the Turkish community, fostering a sense of inclusivity and shared cultural space. Immigrant food businesses, such as döner shops in Germany and baklava shops worldwide, exemplify the dynamic interaction between cultures. These establishments not only offer culinary delights but also serve as platforms for social exchange, fostering mutual understanding and respect. The döner kebab, a staple of Turkish cuisine, found its way to Germany in the 1970s with the influx of Turkish guest workers. Initially a quick, affordable meal for workers, it quickly gained popularity among locals. Döner shops have become ubiquitous in Germany, representing more than just a meal. They are symbols of multiculturalism and integration, reflecting the blending of Turkish and German cultures. The adaptation of the döner to suit local tastes—such as adding different sauces or ingredients—demonstrates culinary hybridity. The döner industry has also significantly contributed to the German economy, providing employment and stimulating local businesses. These shops often serve as entry points for immigrants, offering opportunities for entrepreneurship and economic advancement. Today, the German people have embraced döner so much that it has become recognized as a German dish. During

his visit to Turkey in 2024, German President Steinmeier (11) emphasized the ties between the people of the two countries through döner, which is important to understand how influential migrant gastronomy is. Döner diplomacy was so prominent that the German president invited Arif Keleş, a döner master from Berlin whose grandfather had migrated to Germany as a laborer in the 1960s, to join his delegation during his visit to Turkey. This type of kebab, has become a frequently eaten German dish in Germany. For this purpose, German President Frank Walter Steinmeier hosted a reception during his visit to Istanbul and said, “Döner kebab has now become the national dish of Germany.” At the residence, Steinmeier cut döner kebab with Arif Keleş, a third-generation döner kebab maker who runs a döner shop in Berlin. Steinmeier (11) said, “No fast-food is sold more, eaten more or even exported more than döner kebab in Germany. It should be noted as an interesting note in history that this is similar to the situation a century ago, when workers migrating from Hamburg to America carried the hamburger to America and introduced it to the whole of America. Similar to döner kebab, shawarma is the most prominent of the many products that Lebanese and Syrian refugees have brought to western culture. One of the most important examples of the fast-food sector produced with a technique similar to döner, this döner of the Arab culture has also provided a cultural transfer in all the countries it has traveled to, and as a result, it has also enabled the establishment of bridges between the local people and the refugees.

Similarly, baklava shops established by Middle Eastern refugees have spread across the globe, from the United States to Australia. These shops often serve as cultural hubs where the culinary traditions of the refugees are celebrated and shared with local communities. In the United States, for example, baklava has become a popular dessert, embraced by a diverse range of cultural groups. The integration of baklava into the American dessert repertoire exemplifies how refugee cuisines can be assimilated into the broader food culture of a host country, contributing to cultural diversity and social cohesion. Baklava is a traditional dessert

produced and highly enjoyed in countries like Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon. With refugees and immigrants, baklava has spread to other countries. It became known in America, especially with Armenians who migrated to California. Later, baklava was brought to Europe by Turkish and Arab immigrants. Today, baklava has become a global dessert. Baklava has the potential to foster positive dialogues between cultures as it is often given as a gift and triggers happiness hormones when consumed. Therefore, sweet and pleasant foods like baklava facilitate the establishment of cultural bridges between locals and refugees.

The global diffusion of immigrant culinary practices, such as baklava, mirrors the journeys of those who carry their gastronomic heritage across borders. Often associated with hospitality and celebration, baklava is traditionally served at weddings, religious festivals, and family gatherings, symbolizing warmth, generosity, and shared identity. As baklava shops open in diverse cultural settings—from the United States to Europe and Australia—the dessert adapts to local palates, giving rise to regional variations that reflect both the adaptability and resilience of migrant traditions. These immigrant-owned food establishments frequently evolve into community hubs, facilitating everyday interactions between locals and newcomers, fostering curiosity, and breaking down cultural barriers. In this context, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, particularly in its embodied form, offers a valuable framework for understanding how such culinary practices enable processes of social inclusion. Unlike institutionalized capital such as formal education, embodied cultural capital consists of deeply internalized dispositions—culinary skills, taste preferences, and food-related rituals—acquired through lived experience. Refugees and immigrants mobilize this capital through performative acts such as cooking, serving, and sharing food in new social settings. These practices not only contribute to the richness of the local gastronomic landscape but also serve as strategies for recognition and legitimacy in the host society. Thus, through gastronomy, refugee communities engage in cultural exchange while actively participating in shaping inclusive and pluralistic foodscapes.

In a contemporary context, the cuisine of Syrian refugees has significantly influenced Turkish gastronomy both economically and culturally. Syrian individuals have established a substantial number of cafés, patisseries, bakeries, fast-food outlets, and restaurants, introducing their culinary traditions into the Turkish food landscape. By adapting their recipes to align with the local palate and by introducing new consumption practices, they have facilitated both gastronomic exchange and social interaction.

These food-related enterprises are not merely commercial establishments; they function as cultural bridges that foster interaction between diverse communities. Through sharing the tastes of their homeland, refugee entrepreneurs contribute to the cultural mosaic of their host country, encouraging mutual respect and intercultural understanding.

Beyond individual initiatives, both governmental and non-governmental actors have recognized the integrative potential of food and gastronomy. Numerous projects initiated by NGOs and international organizations have strategically used cuisine as a tool for social inclusion and cohesion, especially within refugee-host community dynamics.

These processes of gastronomic adaptation and integration are particularly visible in Turkey. In metropolitan areas such as Istanbul, the Aksaray district has emerged as a gastronomic enclave known as "Little Damascus," where a dense concentration of Syrian restaurants, sweet shops, and cafés has cultivated a tangible environment of cultural hybridity. These venues attract not only the Syrian diaspora but also local Turkish residents and international visitors, facilitating everyday cultural exchange.

A similar pattern is observable in Gaziantep, where Syrian-owned eateries such as *Sultana* and *Aleppo Kitchen*, *Istasyon* have become integral to the local culinary scene. Offering dishes such as *kibbeh*, *kebab halabi*, and *lahma bil karaz*, these restaurants demonstrate how Syrian culinary heritage blends with regional Turkish tastes, fostering both daily social interaction and longer-term intercultural dialogue. Additionally,

innovative initiatives such as *Mutfakna*—a vegan restaurant whose name combines the Turkish word *mutfak* (kitchen) and the Arabic suffix *-na* (our)—symbolize culinary cohesion and solidarity between Syrian and Turkish communities, reflecting the potential of shared food practices to build inclusive cultural spaces.

Moreover, the widespread popularization of items like *coffee with cardamom*, *falafel*, *hummus*, and *Sham-style döner (Shawarmma)*—distinguished by its garlic sauce, sumac-seasoned onions, and pickled vegetables wrapped in *lavash*—within Turkey’s fast food and street food scenes exemplifies deeper gastronomic integration. Even national chains such as *Komagene* have incorporated falafel into their menus, signaling the mainstreaming of such hybrid culinary forms.

These examples illustrate how food operates as a mediator of identity, belonging, and cultural negotiation in migratory contexts. Through everyday practices of cooking, sharing, and consuming food, refugees not only preserve their cultural heritage but also actively participate in shaping an inclusive and evolving foodscape in their host societies.

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative case study design complemented by qualitative interpretation to explore the economic and cultural contributions of refugee-led food businesses, with a particular focus on Syrian-owned enterprises in Gaziantep, Turkey. While no primary qualitative data (e.g., interviews or ethnographic fieldwork) were collected, the analysis is informed by a theory-guided interpretation of quantitative data, a well-established approach in sociological and cultural research (23) (24).

The research draws on firm-level secondary data obtained in October 2024 from the available records on the Turkish Trade Registry Gazette [Türkiye Ticaret Sicil Gazetesi], accessed via its official online platform (22). In total, 975 Syrian-owned businesses legally registered in Gaziantep were identified.

Using NACE classification codes, these firms were categorized by economic sector—such as wholesale trade, food processing, and hospitality. A focused subset of 203 companies operating in food-related sectors (e.g., restaurants, cafés, baklava producers, grocery stores) was selected to analyze intersections between economic activity and cultural integration.

In line with the principles of analytical generalization (25), this subset was not statistically representative but theoretically significant. The empirical data were interpreted through the lens of cultural sociology, particularly drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of embodied cultural capital and Homi Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridity. This interpretive framework enabled an understanding of how culinary practices function as sites of symbolic negotiation, integration, and social visibility.

Rather than claiming a full “mixed-methods” design, this research adopts a qualitative sociological interpretation of quantitative data, a methodologically valid practice especially when embedded within a robust theoretical framework (26). This approach permits in-depth cultural insight without the need for direct qualitative fieldwork.

The empirical case of Gaziantep thus illustrates broader regional dynamics concerning the role of refugee entrepreneurship in promoting cultural, economic, and social sustainability, while engaging conceptually with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Since the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Turkey has become a primary destination for displaced Syrians, with Gaziantep emerging as a key host city due to its geographical proximity and economic vitality. Over the years, Syrian refugees in Gaziantep have transitioned from humanitarian aid recipients to active economic participants. This study draws on firm-level data from the Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce

and Ministry of Trade to analyze the sectoral distribution and cultural impact of Syrian-owned businesses in the city. As of 2024, approximately 975 Syrian-owned firms operate in Gaziantep, the majority of which are concentrated in food-related industries such as wholesale trade, food manufacturing, and hospitality (Table 1).

Among these, 537 firms (55.1%) are engaged in wholesale food trade, underscoring the pivotal role of Syrian entrepreneurs in regional supply chains. Additionally, 84 firms operate in baklava, flour, and pastry production, while 74 run cafés, restaurants, and catering services, contributing to both the culinary economy and social fabric of Gaziantep. These businesses not only reinforce the city's position as a gastronomic capital but also facilitate cultural exchange through Levantine-Turkish culinary fusion. Syrian entrepreneurs have enriched the local foodscape by introducing new techniques and dishes such as *shawarma*, *muhammara*, and *Aleppo-style spices*, often adapted to local tastes to create hybrid food identities.

In this context, gastronomy functions as a driver of cultural and social sustainability, preserving heritage while enabling interaction across communities. As Carballo-Cruz and Saenz De Jubera (10) note, culinary exchange strengthens inclusivity and contributes to more resilient, multicultural societies. The case

of Gaziantep illustrates this dynamic clearly: Syrian food businesses not only preserve and transmit cultural knowledge, but also generate employment, attract food tourism, and support innovation in food manufacturing (e.g., fusion baklava, dairy adaptations).

Importantly, the cultural transmission through food supports intergenerational continuity within refugee families while simultaneously introducing host communities to unfamiliar culinary traditions. As Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (9) argue, food exchange is not just material but symbolic—conveying values, stories, and identities that foster empathy and solidarity. In Gaziantep, supermarkets and grocery stores (60 Syrian-owned firms) increasingly stock both Turkish and Syrian goods, contributing to shared everyday consumer experiences and mutual visibility.

Gaziantep's designation as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy (14) further amplifies the relevance of Syrian culinary contributions. The arrival of Syrian food entrepreneurs has diversified the city's gastronomic identity, reinforcing its global culinary reputation and deepening cross-cultural interaction. Moreover, these businesses function as community hubs where locals and newcomers meet, share meals, and form social ties—contributing to social cohesion, tolerance, and mutual adaptation.

Table 1. Food firms established by Syrian refugees in Gaziantep

Profession Group (with NACE Codes)	Number of Companies
1. Agricultural Products - Grains - Pulses - Spices (NACE: 01.1, 01.2, 01.3, 46.3)	34
2. Flour Products - Baklava - Flour - Bulgur - Pulse Manufacturing (NACE: 10.1, 10.8, 46.3)	84
3. Pistachio and Nuts (NACE: 10.3, 46.3)	37
4. Sugary Products - Beverages - Chocolate - Dairy Products (NACE: 10.8, 10.5, 10.6, 46.3)	45
5. Food Wholesalers and All Kinds of Wholesale Trade (NACE: 46.1, 46.2, 46.3, 46.9)	537
6. Supermarkets - Grocery Stores (NACE: 47.1, 47.2)	60
7. Fresh - Dried Fruits and Vegetables Wholesale Trade (NACE: 46.3, 46.9)	67
8. Cafes - Restaurants - Catering Services (NACE: 56.1, 56.2, 56.3)	74
9. Live Animals - Animal Products and Feed Producers (NACE: 01.4, 01.5, 10.9)	37
Total	975

In conclusion, Syrian entrepreneurship in Gaziantep illustrates how gastronomy can serve as a powerful platform for both economic resilience and cultural sustainability. The integration of refugee food practices into local systems enriches not only the economy but also the social imagination of host communities. As Table 1 indicates, this sectoral distribution reflects a vibrant and growing field of economic participation rooted in culinary tradition and innovation. Moving forward, supportive policy frameworks that encourage collaboration between Syrian and Turkish entrepreneurs can further harness this potential, positioning gastronomy as a cornerstone of inclusive and sustainable development.

Connecting Cultural and Social Sustainability with Sustainable Development Goals

The integration of refugee gastronomy into local food cultures also has significant implications for sustainable development, particularly in the realms of economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental stewardship—three key pillars of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Economic growth

Refugee-led food businesses contribute to local economies by creating jobs, generating income, and revitalizing neighborhoods. These businesses often introduce innovative food products and services that attract diverse customer bases, thereby stimulating local economic activity. Furthermore, by participating in local markets and food festivals, refugees enhance the vibrancy and diversity of the food industry, which can lead to broader economic benefits for the host community.

For example, over 5,000 Syrian-owned businesses are registered in Istanbul alone, making the city a leading hub for refugee entrepreneurship. While a precise sectoral breakdown is not publicly available, studies by UNDP (15) and IGAM (16) indicate that a significant portion of these enterprises operate in the food and hospitality sector, including restaurants, cafés, bakeries, and catering services.

In cities like Gaziantep, where approximately 23% of Syrian businesses in Turkey are located, establishments such as Aleppo Kitchen and Sultana Restaurant have become well-integrated into the local culinary landscape. These businesses not only provide employment to both Syrians and locals but also enrich the gastronomic diversity of the region. Moreover, many participate in local markets and food festivals, enhancing the vibrancy of the food sector and supporting inclusive economic growth.

According to this study and as demonstrated in Table 1, a significant number of Syrian-owned businesses in Gaziantep are active in three key sectors with high potential for cultural and economic integration:

Sweets and confectionery production (including baklava and traditional Middle Eastern desserts), restaurants, cafés, and catering services, food manufacturing and grocery retail.

These sectors (highlighted in red in Table 1) are closely tied to both local consumer culture and Gaziantep's gastronomic identity. In addition, other sectors identified in the research—such as wholesale food trade, dried fruits, spices, and agricultural products—primarily reflect Syrian merchants' participation in traditional commercial activities and demonstrate the transference of Syrian trade culture into Turkey's regional markets.

The economic empowerment of refugees through culinary entrepreneurship aligns directly with Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), as it promotes sustainable economic development and creates opportunities for dignified employment. These refugee-run food initiatives exemplify how grassroots entrepreneurship can play a vital role in building resilient and inclusive urban economies.

Social inclusion

The cultural exchange facilitated by refugee gastronomy directly supports SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by promoting social inclusion and reducing inequalities within societies. When

refugees share their culinary traditions with local populations, they contribute to breaking down cultural barriers and fostering a sense of belonging.

In Turkey, where over 3.2 million Syrian refugees reside, gastronomy has emerged as a vital medium for intercultural dialogue and social cohesion. Refugee-operated food businesses—such as Syrian-owned dessert shops and cafés in Istanbul’s “Little Damascus” (Aksaray)—serve not only as commercial venues but also as communal spaces for cultural interaction. These establishments are frequented by both local populations and other immigrant communities, enabling everyday encounters that challenge stereotypes and promote mutual understanding.

Community kitchens and culinary workshops further reinforce this process. Initiatives like Kırkayak Kültür’s gastronomy programs (e.g., *Humus*) (17), in Gaziantep and SGDD-ASAM’s cooking classes for refugees (18) and local women not only provide vocational training but also create spaces for storytelling, shared labor, and emotional connection. These programs often emphasize co-creation, such as in the case of the vegan restaurant Mutfakna (19), which symbolizes unity beyond ethnic and national boundaries.

Moreover, these food-centered interactions contribute to the development of informal social networks, through which refugees gain practical support—language practice, job opportunities, housing advice—that directly reduce barriers to full societal participation. In this way, culinary encounters are not merely symbolic but constitute tangible mechanisms for social integration, recognition, and empowerment.

According to the Gaziantep data presented in Table 1, the three culturally rich sectors mentioned earlier (restaurants, sweets production, and retail food services) are also key sites of cultural transmission and social cohesion. They facilitate daily face-to-face encounters between Turkish and Syrian populations and serve as intercultural bridges within the urban fabric. Meanwhile, the sectors with a more commercial orientation (e.g., wholesale trade of legumes, spices, dried

fruits) represent an important continuation of Syrian commercial tradition, and illustrate how economic participation can coexist with deeper processes of cultural exchange.

By opening up cultural space in public life and enabling refugees to be seen as contributors rather than burdens, gastronomic engagement helps counteract marginalization and build more inclusive, equal societies. This grassroots cultural diplomacy complements institutional efforts and highlights the transformative potential of everyday practices in advancing the goals of equality and inclusion.

Environmental stewardship (SDG 12)

The culinary practices of many refugee communities often include sustainable food practices, such as the use of local and seasonal ingredients, traditional preservation methods, and waste minimization techniques. By introducing these practices to their host countries, refugees can contribute to more sustainable food systems, aligning with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).

Additionally, the fusion of local and refugee culinary traditions can lead to the creation of new dishes that are both culturally significant and environmentally sustainable. These hybrid culinary forms represent a more thoughtful and resource-efficient approach to food production and consumption. In Gaziantep, sectors such as baklava and pastry production, nuts and dried fruits, and grocery trade (see Table 1) provide tangible examples of this integration. Many of these businesses operate on low-waste, seasonal, and handmade production models, reflecting culinary values grounded in both tradition and sustainability.

The integration of refugee gastronomy into local culinary landscapes thus serves as a powerful catalyst for cultural and social sustainability, which in turn supports the broader goals of sustainable development. By preserving cultural heritage, fostering social inclusion, and promoting economic and environmental sustainability, refugee culinary practices contribute to the creation of resilient, inclusive, and sustainable communities. These interactions

between refugee and local cuisines not only enrich the cultural and social fabric of host societies but also play a crucial role in building a sustainable future where diversity, solidarity, and ecological awareness are at the forefront of development.

Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11)

The integration of refugee gastronomy into urban public life contributes directly to Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), which calls for inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable urban environments. Refugee-led food enterprises—such as Syrian-owned restaurants, cafés, bakeries, and community kitchens—play a transformative role in revitalizing urban spaces and enhancing social resilience at the neighborhood level.

In cities like Istanbul, the emergence of districts such as “Little Damascus” in Aksaray illustrates how refugee communities shape urban cultural geography through gastronomy. These spaces are not only centers of economic activity but also serve as cultural anchors where everyday encounters between locals and refugees foster mutual recognition and coexistence. Similarly, in Gaziantep, food establishments like Sultana, Aleppo Kitchen, and Mutfakna represent examples of how refugee food practices are embedded in the city’s urban fabric, contributing to social interaction, spatial inclusion, and economic vitality.

Moreover, projects such as Kırkayak Kültür’s refugee kitchens (17), Komşu Kafe Kolektifi (20), and SGDD-ASAM’s (18) culinary workshops serve as hybrid urban commons, where food becomes a vehicle for shared identity, collective care, and urban participation. These initiatives illustrate how gastronomy fosters urban cohesion, turning food into a medium through which cultural sustainability and social justice intersect.

In light of the findings presented in Table 1, the clustering of Syrian-owned businesses in specific food-related sectors and districts reflects how migration-driven entrepreneurship can reshape the socio-spatial dynamics of Turkish cities. By contributing to urban vitality, cultural visibility,

and inclusive economies, refugee gastronomy becomes a cornerstone of sustainable urban development, in line with the targets of SDG 11.

CONCLUSION

The integration of refugee gastronomy into local culinary landscapes is a complex, multidimensional process that plays a pivotal role in advancing cultural sustainability, social cohesion, and inclusive development. Through everyday culinary interactions—cooking, eating, and exchanging recipes—refugees and host communities co-create spaces of mutual recognition, shared identity, and evolving taste. These exchanges not only enrich the gastronomic diversity of host societies but also facilitate meaningful pathways for refugee participation in economic, social, and cultural life.

This study has demonstrated that refugee-led food practices are not merely cultural expressions but also powerful mechanisms for sustainable development and integration. Drawing on theoretical perspectives—such as Bourdieu’s cultural capital, Bhabha’s hybridity (2), and Appadurai’s gastro-politics (3)—and supported by empirical data from Gaziantep, the research has shown how culinary entrepreneurship intersects with key Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).

In cities like Gaziantep, where refugee-owned food businesses have become integral to the urban landscape, gastronomy serves as both a cultural bridge and an economic engine. Initiatives that support refugee women’s cooperatives—such as those facilitated by KEDV—and intercultural culinary projects provide powerful examples of how food can foster solidarity, visibility, and social resilience.

Looking ahead, the future of refugee gastronomy lies in its capacity to support economic empowerment, cultural preservation, and urban coexistence. By investing in sustainable food entrepreneurship, community-driven initiatives, and inclusive culinary spaces, refugees can

build dignified livelihoods while contributing to the cultural and economic vitality of their host societies (21).

To fully realize this potential, future integration policies must recognize food not only as a symbol of identity but also as a strategic tool for inclusion, economic development, and urban transformation. Local governments, civil society, and international actors should prioritize support mechanisms such as access to commercial kitchens, funding opportunities, business mentoring, and shared marketplaces.

Ultimately, every dish shared between communities tells a story—not just of displacement, but of creativity, endurance, and shared humanity. In embracing refugee gastronomy, we do not simply enrich our palates; we nourish the foundations of a more inclusive, resilient, and culturally vibrant society.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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The corresponding author is solely responsible for the authorship and writing of this manuscript; no additional contributors were involved.