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FOOD AS A SITE OF CULTURAL CONTINUITY, IDENTITY, AND ADAPTATION AMONG KYRGYZ MIGRANTS IN TURKIYE

Abstract

This study explores the culinary experiences of Kyrgyz migrants living in Türkiye, focusing on how food practices contribute to cultural continuity, adaptation, and identity formation. Based on semi-structured interviews with sixteen Kyrgyz participants in Ankara, the research examines how food becomes a meaningful part of everyday life in migration, shaping emotional, cultural, and practical experiences. The findings indicate that migration leads participants to reevaluate the significance of food, which they was often taken for granted before relocation. In the absence of familiar tastes such as horse meat, kımız, sağmal, kurut and traditional dishes like samsa, lagman, dımdıma, oromo, kuurdak and besh parmak, participants come to recognize the symbolic and emotional weight of food in relation to memory, family, and belonging. One key finding shows that the feeling of being 'full' after eating extends beyond physical nourishment, functioning as a metaphor for cultural belonging and emotional well-being. Participants describe how, even when they eat enough in Türkiye, they still feel hungry in the absence of traditional Kyrgyz dishes. This sense of hunger reflects emotional and cultural needs that remain unmet, particularly during times of psychological strain, when there is a strong need for familiar flavors to provide comfort and stability.

The findings also reveal that adapting to a new culinary landscape involves more than learning new tastes, it often triggers discomfort when familiar flavors are absent. A recurring challenge for participants is the perceived difference in the taste of red meat in Türkiye compared to Kyrgyzstan. This contrast is attributed to differences in animal feeding practices and ecological conditions. For participants, the inability to replicate the taste of home-cooked meat-based dishes underscores the importance of accessing ingredients that are closely tied to geography, soil characteristics, and climate conditions. The study also documents how migrants develop practical

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strategies such as transporting food in luggage, relying on informal networks, or using local substitutes to maintain access to culturally meaningful foods and tastes. Although many participants express enjoyment of Turkish cuisine, these new culinary experiences do not replace the emotional fulfillment offered by Kyrgyz food. Instead, they reflect an ongoing negotiation between preservation and adaptation, highlighting the role of food in navigating the realities of migrant life.

Keywords: Kyrgyz migrants, dietary acculturation, culinary culture, Kyrgyz food culture, migration and food, food and identity, cultural continuty.

TÜRKİYE'DEKİ KIRGIZ GÖÇMENLER ARASINDA KÜLTÜREL SÜREKLİLİK, KİMLİK VE UYUMUN BİR ALANI OLARAK YEMEK

Öz

Bu çalışma, Türkiye'de yaşayan Kırgız göçmenlerin mutfak deneyimlerini inceleyerek, yemek pratiklerinin kültürel süreklilik, uyum ve kimlik inşasına nasıl katkı sağladığını ortaya koymaktadır. Ankara'da yaşayan on altı katılımcıyla yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelere dayanan araştırma, göç sürecinde yemeğin gündelik yaşamın duygusal, kültürel ve pratik boyutlarını nasıl şekillendirdiğine odaklanmaktadır. Bulgular, göçün katılımcıları daha önce farkında olmadıkları bir biçimde yemeğin anlamını yeniden değerlendirmeye ittiğini göstermektedir. At eti, *kımız*, *sağmal*, *kurut* gibi tanıdık tatların ve *samsa*, *lagman*, *dımdıma*, *oromo*, *kuurdak* ve *beşparmak* gibi geleneksel yemeklerin yokluğunda, katılımcılar yemeğin hafıza, aile ve aidiyetle ilişkili sembolik ve duygusal ağırlığını fark etmeye başlamıştır. Çalışmanın önemli bulgularından biri, yemekten sonra hissedilen "doyma" duygusunun yalnızca fiziksel olmadığı, aynı zamanda kültürel aidiyet ve duygusal iyilik haliyle ilişkili bir metafor olarak işlev gördüğüdür. Katılımcılar, Türkiye'de yeterince yemek yeseler dahi, geleneksel Kırgız yemeklerinin yokluğunda hâlâ kendi yemekleri için açlık hissettiklerini ifade etmektedir. Bu açlık, özellikle psikolojik zorluk dönemlerinde ortaya çıkan ve yalnızca tanıdık tatlarla giderilebilen, kültürel ve duygusal bir ihtiyaca işaret etmektedir. Bu bağlamda, yemeğin yalnızca fiziksel değil, aynı zamanda duygusal ve kültürel bir doyum aracı olduğu görülmektedir.

Araştırma, yeni bir mutfak kültürüne uyum sürecinin yalnızca yeni tatları öğrenmekten ibaret olmadığını, aynı zamanda tanıdık lezzetlerin yokluğunda rahatsızlık ve eksiklik duygularını da tetiklediğini göstermektedir. Katılımcılar, özellikle kırmızı etin Türkiye'deki tadının Kırgızistan'dakinden farklı olduğunu sıklıkla vurgulamıştır. Bu fark, hayvanların beslenme biçimleri ve ekolojik koşullardaki farklılıklarla açıklanmaktadır. Evde pişirilen et yemeklerinin alışılmış tadına ulaşamamak, coğrafyaya, toprak yapısına ve iklim koşullarına bağlı malzemelere erişimin önemini ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, göçmenlerin kültürel açıdan anlamlı gıdalara erişimi sürdürmek için geliştirdikleri stratejileri de içermektedir. Katılımcılar, yiyecekleri bavulda taşımak, gayriresmî ağlardan faydalanmak ya da yerel alternatifleri kullanmak gibi yöntemlerle bu boşluğu doldurmaya çalışmaktadır. Her ne kadar bazı katılımcılar Türk mutfağından da keyif aldıklarını ifade etseler de, bu yeni tatlar Kırgız yemeklerinin sunduğu duygusal doyumu tam olarak karşılamamaktadır. Bunun yerine, bu

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durum kültürel sürekliliği koruma ve yeni ortama uyum sağlama arasında devam eden bir müzakereyi yansıtmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kırgız göçmenler, beslenme kültürüne uyum, mutfak kültürü, Kırgız yemek kültürü, göç ve yemek, yemek ve kimlik, kültürel süreklilik.

Introduction

Food holds emotional and social meanings for migrants, particularly when separated from the culinary traditions of home. In migratory settings, food becomes a powerful medium through which connections to homeland, identity, and memory are sustained, while also serving as a daily practice through which individuals construct their sense of self. This study examines the culinary experiences of Kyrgyz migrants living in Türkiye, focusing on how food practices function as tools for maintaining cultural identity. At the same time, the study also addresses the process of adaptation to a new culinary culture and the encounters with a different dietary environment.

A central focus of the study is the participants' perspectives on both traditional Kyrgyz foods and the new culinary practices they encountered in Türkiye. The findings shed light on how food serves as a medium for cultural continuity, and adaptation while new culinary encounters also lead individuals to question the meaning of their own culinary culture and incorporate new tastes into their dietary habits. Participants express a deep attachment to traditional Kyrgyz flavors and dishes, which for them represent not only nourishment but also familial bonds, childhood memories, regional identities, and a sense of belonging to Kyrgyzstan.

This study reveals that the experience of "feeling full" after eating extends beyond physical satiation, emerging instead as an emotionally meaningful state. Participants describe how, despite eating enough in Türkiye, the absence of traditional Kyrgyz dishes often leaves them feeling hungry for their own culturally meaningful foods. This sense of hunger is particularly pronounced during times of psychological strain. In this way, "being full" becomes a metaphor for cultural belonging and psychological comfort, illustrating how food practices shape not only bodily satisfaction but also emotional well-being in the migration context.

Data of the study suggest that migration disrupts access to these culturally significant foods and the essential ingredients required for their preparation. The unavailability of horse meat, horse milk products, specific herbs, and other traditional items compels migrants to develop creative strategies such as bringing food from Kyrgyzstan in their luggage, utilizing migrant networks for transportation, or seeking substitutes within the Turkish culinary landscape. While some participants demonstrate a degree of culinary acculturation by learning Turkish cuisine and integrating into the host country's food culture, all of them

continue to experience a sense of displacement, where familiar tastes are either inaccessible or altered.

This research contributes to broader discussions on migration, cultural identity, and food studies, demonstrating how food operates as a dynamic arena where memory, identity, and adaptation intersect. In doing so, it offers a perspective on how Kyrgyz migrants navigate the journey between the tastes of their homeland and the realities of their new lives in Türkiye.

1. Methodology

This study is based on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with 16 Kyrgyz individuals residing in Ankara. The research aims to answer the following questions: What role does food play in the construction of Kyrgyz migrant identity and sense of belonging? How and to what extent do Kyrgyz migrants sustain their traditional food practices in the context of migration? How do Kyrgyz migrants in Ankara perceive and interpret the differences between Kyrgyz food culture and the food culture in Türkiye? How do Kyrgyz migrants in Ankara engage with Turkish culinary culture? How do Kyrgyz migrants in Ankara experience dietary acculturation?

To recruit participants for this study, snowball sampling techniques were employed. This technique allowed the researcher to access participants through established social networks. Initial participants were identified via community contacts and subsequently invited to refer to others. This approach facilitated trust and access, enabling the fieldwork to be completed in a brief period. The final sample consisted of 16 participants, including 2 men (P1 and P3) and 14 women. This gender distribution may be attributed to the snowball sampling method, which depended on referrals through personal connections, most of whom were women. The data of the study were analyzed using a thematic analysis method, in which codes were derived directly from the data and then organized into overarching themes. The research identifies key themes such as longing for homeland ingredients and dishes, new meanings attributted to food, changing food practices, and adaptation to a new taste. To ensure participant anonymity, real names are not used and replaced with abbreviated identifiers. Each participant is referred to using the letter "P" (denoting "Participant") followed by a numerical code indicating their sequence in the study. The ethics committee approval for this study was obtained with the decision numbered E-11054618-302.08.01-348520, dated 30.04.2025, of the Ethics Committee of Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University.

2. Migration, Food and Dietary Acculturation

Ethnic food, and specifically home-cooked meals, serves as a strong identity marker for migrants. Research findings suggest that home dishes are a powerful means of identity expression in migration settings. The study conducted by Naidu and Nzuza (2013) examines the significance of traditional, “home food” for Sierra Leoneans in the city of Durban, particularly in terms of maintaining a sense of self and expressing a specific identity. The

findings reveal that eating "home food" is one of the ways through which Sierra Leonean migrants maintain and express their identities. Although accessing these foods is not always easy, participants' narratives clearly express a longing for home-cooked meals. The study revealed that home food serves as a marker through which migrants define both *who they are* and *who they are not* (Naidu and Nzuza 2013: 194), making it a central element in the construction and negotiation of identity in a migratory context.

Similar themes emerge in the work of Ore (2018), highlighting the symbolic function of home cooking for migrants. One of the central findings of the study is that, for Jewish-Israeli migrant women in New Zealand, cooking Jewish ethnic dishes at home becomes a cultural journey that connects them to past generations and their homeland. By recreating the tastes and recipes of their female kin and using gifted cooking tools individuals maintain a tangible connection to their cultural roots (Ore 2018: 575).

Another study that emphasizes the significance of home cooking in preserving cultural identity is the one conducted by Lin, Pang, and Liao (2020), which explores the everyday practices of home cooking and food-related activities among Taiwanese immigrant women in Belgium. The study shows that obtaining ingredients specific to Taiwanese cuisine presents a significant challenge, as Asian and Chinese markets in Belgium do not offer all the products unique to Taiwan. This difficulty has led many women to cultivate certain foods in their home gardens. These gardens have evolved into symbolic spaces that connect memories of pre-migration life with the present. The study shows that the most expressed associations related to home or ethnic foods for Taiwanese immigrant women in the study are memories from childhood, a sense of ethnonational identity, and specific cultural symbols (Lin, Pang, and Liao 2020: 14).

While these studies highlight the emotional and cultural significance of food in migrant settings, understanding how migrants navigate new culinary environments also requires engaging with the concept of acculturation. The concept of acculturation describes the changes in cultural patterns that arise in both groups or in just one group because of continuous and direct contact between individuals from distinct cultures (Redfield, Linton & Herskovits 1936: 149). According to Mena, Padilla, and Maldonado (1987: 207), acculturation describes the processes of change that begin when individuals are exposed to a new cultural environment. Berry (2017: 15) defines acculturation as the cultural and psychological changes that result from contact between two or more cultural groups and their members. According to him, acculturation includes changes at the cultural level in social structures, institutions, and cultural norms, while at the psychological level it refers to changes in individuals' behaviors that occur during the adaptation process.

Migration like globalization, and urbanization have led to the emergence of new culinary traditions that incorporate elements from distinct cultures (Trisutaguna,

Abdelrahman and Ramli 2025: 63). The concept of dietary acculturation refers to the process by which members of a minority group adapt to the eating habits or food preferences of the host country (Satia-Abouta, Patterson, Neuhouser and Elder 2002: 1106; Satia-Abouta 2003: 74). A growing body of literature highlights the dynamic and complex nature of this adaptation, shaped by individual, cultural, and structural factors. Several studies have investigated how the degree of cultural integration influences dietary behavior. Lv and Cason (2004), in their survey among Chinese immigrants in Pennsylvania, found that the participants exhibited increased consumption across all major food groups, particularly in relation to Western-style products. Factors such as education level, length of stay, and English language proficiency were identified as significant predictors of dietary change. Similarly, Lee, Sobal, and Frongillo (1999) found that among Korean immigrants in the United States, those with higher acculturation levels consumed more American foods (like low-fat milk, bagels, and bread) and fewer traditional Korean items (like rice, kimchi, garlic). Study shows that, American foods such as oranges, low-fat milk, bagels, tomatoes, and bread were consumed, while Korean foods like rice, kimchi, garlic, green onions, and Korean soup continued to be consumed regularly. However, this transition is not uniform across meals. Western food is more prevalent at breakfast, while traditional Korean dishes remain dominant at dinner. In the case of Central Asian labor migrants in South Korea, Lee and Kim (2021) demonstrated that dietary shifts included both the adoption of local food habits, including increased consumption of vegetables, rice, kimchi, and seafood, and the reduction of previously dominant items like lamb and beef.

Other studies also emphasize the coexistence of traditional and new food practices. Satia et al. (2001), for instance, showed that even among Chinese women with low levels of acculturation in Seattle and Vancouver, there was still significant adoption of Western habits, with 56% eating at fast-food restaurants. Likewise, Osei-Kwasi, Powell, Nicolaou, and Holdsworth (2017) reported that Ghanaian migrants in the United Kingdom maintained many core elements of Ghanaian food culture while incorporating aspects of British cuisine. These findings suggest that acculturation often results in hybrid food practices. Rule, Dring, and Thornton (2022: 4-5) also elaborate on this point by showing that dietary change occurs differently for different participants. For some, it is limited to public dining contexts such as restaurants, while for others, it extends to meals prepared at home, consumed in public settings, and served during special occasions. In a more recent study, Li, Carolino, and Sousa (2023) reported that 71.4% of the participants in the study, who were Chinese immigrants residing in Portugal, exhibited elevated levels of dietary acculturation, particularly through increased intake of energy-dense Western foods. Importantly, the blending of Chinese and Portuguese cuisines appeared to intensify with time spent in the host country.

Some factors also play a critical role in shaping dietary acculturation and adaptation. Terragni, Garnweidner, Pettersen, and Mosdøl (2014), in their study of South Asian, African,

and Middle Eastern women in Norway, observed that migrants initially struggled with food adaptation due to unfamiliarity with local food items, different meal structures, and religious constraints. Age is another significant factor in explaining dietary acculturation, with older individuals being more inclined to preserve established food practices rather than adapt to new dietary patterns in the host culture. In the study conducted by Lillekroken, Bye, Halvorsrud, Terragni, and Debesay (2024), primary sources on the eating habits and meal preferences of elderly migrants were examined. Their study revealed that elderly migrants wish to maintain their traditional eating habits and meal preferences because these practices serve as a source of comfort and reassurance by reminding them of their identity.

Only a few studies exist on the food culture adaptation of Kyrgyz people in Türkiye. Şimşek (2019: 217), in a section of her study on Kyrgyz people who migrated from the Pamir region of Afghanistan to Türkiye in the 1980s, focuses on the transformation of food practices through generational differences. It was observed that the Kyrgyz community living in Ulupamir, Van has maintained its traditional food culture. Meals that were traditionally consumed on the floor around shared cloth are still eaten in the same way. However, the study points out a notable change compared to the past: most individuals now prefer to eat from their own plates rather than from a communal one. The practice of preparing traditional Kyrgyz dishes varies across generations, with the frequency of preparation decreasing from the first to the third generation. Additionally, it has been found that they began consuming vegetables unfamiliar to them in Pamir after migration and have learned and adopted many dishes from Turkish cuisine.

In the study conducted by Yüksel (2022), the daily life practices of Kyrgyz migrant women living in Antalya were focused on, and the food related practices of Kyrgyz women were also included in this research. The research findings show that migrants' efforts to preserve food culture and adapt to a new one are dependent on individual experiences. In the study, while it was seen that some of the participants initially had difficulty getting used to the food in Türkiye but got used to it over time, it was stated that others did not experience this adaptation process and still emphasize the differences between the foods in Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye. The participants who stated that they could not get used to the food in Türkiye and missed their own dishes continue to cook and adapt some meals themselves, even if they cannot fully reach the flavors they seek (Yüksel 2022: 32–33).

Taken together, these studies reveal that migrants often negotiate between continuity and change, aiming to retain some food practices while selectively adopting new ones. Accordingly, dietary acculturation should be understood as a multidimensional process shaped by factors such as the cultural proximity between food traditions and the availability of suitable substitutes in the host society.

3. Longing for One's Own Food: "*I Feel Like My Heart and Stomach Are Craving It*"

The data reveal that participants were not fully aware of the significance of Kyrgyz food in their daily lives until migration separated them from it. What had once been perceived as a routine and unremarkable part of everyday life in Kyrgyzstan became distinctly associated with the notion of homeland after migration. In this absence of "own food", the cultural and emotional meanings attached to food reinforce its role as a marker of identity and belonging.

P1 exemplifies this realization, reflecting on how distance from home redefined his relationship with food*: "I realized that Turkish cuisine is different from ours. I understood this after coming here. Before, I thought they were similar. Then I said, everything is completely different. I miss it, I miss samsa the most. We used to make it a lot at home."* P8 shares similar feelings: *"When you're there (Kyrgyzstan), it turns out that you don't really appreciate certain things. When you come here, you realize that meat or food you were familiar with is missing, you start to feel bad. You think things like, 'When I was in Kyrgyzstan, I used to eat more of this."* Similarly, P11 articulates how migration prompted her to reassess the role of food in her life: *"After coming to Türkiye, I realized that food is important to me. In Kyrgyzstan, I did not think much about what I would eat."* Likewise, P9 explains that she did not anticipate such a difference in overall cuisine: *"I realized that Turkish cuisine is different from ours. I understood this after coming here. Before, I thought they were similar. Then I said, everything is completely different."*

These statements underscore how migration can heighten awareness of daily diet once considered routine. This shift in perception triggered a profound longing for what the participants refer to as "our own food." This awareness becomes especially pronounced when participants describe cravings that only traditional Kyrgyz dishes can satisfy. P10 vividly recalls eating Kyrgyz *tandır samsa* with her friend in Ankara for the first time: "*We smelled it on our hands, looked at each other, and said, 'I want to cry.'*" She explains that her hunger is often not for just any food, but specifically for Kyrgyz food. P6 echoes this sentiment: "*I eat other food, but I only truly feel full when it's Kyrgyz food.*"

P7 offers a similar reflection: "*When I eat Turkish food, I feel full, but it feels like something is missing. It is like I am still hungry, like I am still thirsty. But when I eat Kyrgyz food, it is different*." P9 further illustrates how these cravings transcend physical hunger, connecting deeply with emotion: "*It feels like my whole body loves it (Kyrgyz food). I feel like my heart and stomach are craving it."* The experience of eating without feeling "truly full" reflects more than just physical hunger. It reveals a culturally embedded expectation of what constitutes a satisfying meal. This suggests that satisfying hunger is not solely a physiological state but also a cultural and emotional one.

In Türkiye, food shifted from being a nourishment necessity to becoming a source of longing, serving as a means of relief. One example of the relief that traditional food can provide

comes from P13, a student who lives in a dormitory and does not have access to proper cooking equipment. She shares that she often craves Kyrgyz food during moments of heightened stress, especially around exam periods: "*I crave Kyrgyz food when I'm stressed like before and after exams*." She says, "*I find myself thinking, 'I wish I could eat our food*.'" P13's reflection highlights that in times of psychological strain, the consumption of familiar tastes serves as a form of emotional coping mechanism, offering comfort, a sense of stability, and relief.

Samsa frequently appears in all participants' statements as something deeply longed for. P5 points out that while having a kitchen offers her greater flexibility to cook, it does not necessarily guarantee the ability to fully recreate traditional Kyrgyz dishes. Some foods, she explains, require specific methods and tools that are difficult to replicate in a standard Turkish kitchen. For instance, she mentions *samsa* which in Kyrgyzstan is traditionally baked in a *tandır* which is a clay oven that gives a distinct flavor and texture. Although she can prepare *samsa* at home, she notes that it never tastes quite the same as it does back home, primarily because she lacks access to a *tandır*. P10 also misses *samsa* and states that it is exceedingly difficult to find a substitute for its taste in Turkish cuisine. She adds, "*The only bread here that can compare to our tandır bread is Ramazan pide. However, it is not available throughout the year*." The longing for *tandır* bread and *samsa* leads participants to carry them from Kyrgyzstan in their luggage. For example, P10 and P11 report that for them, *tandır* bread is an essential item that must be packed whenever they travel from Kyrgyzstan to Türkiye.

Beyond the challenges of replicating traditional cooking methods, participants also pointed to specific ingredients that are essential to authentic flavors of *samsa*s at home but difficult or impossible to find in Türkiye. Two participants from the southern region of Kyrgyzstan highlighted a distinctive herb, known as *calpız*, as an essential yet impossible-to-find ingredient outside its native areas. *calpız* is a wild, mint-like herb that grows in the spring, prized for its unique and aromatic flavor. Both participants emphasized that its taste is so specific that even within Kyrgyzstan, it can be difficult to obtain outside certain regions due to its localized growth patterns**.** They also noted that *calpız* is commonly found in some parts of Uzbekistan. Importantly, these two participants also shared memories of collecting *calpız* during springtime, describing it as a seasonal activity that connected them with nature. This herb plays a crucial role in the preparation of a seasonal delicacy called *kök samsı*, which is a type of samsa filled with fresh herbs. Both participants expressed a deep longing for this kind of *samsa*. The absence of *calpız* in Türkiye renders this dish truly irreplaceable, as no alternative herb can replicate its distinctive flavor. Even though they can find *samsa* in Ankara, participants emphasize that the taste of samsa made with *calpız* is entirely different for them, highlighting the uniqueness of this seasonal ingredient and its deep connection to their culinary memory.

The difficulty in replicating familiar tastes is not limited to *tandır*-baked and different kind of *samsa*; it extends to other traditional cooking methods as well. P9 highlights that foods cooked in a *kazan* over a wood fire have a distinctly different and richer taste. She emphasizes that it is not only the flavor of ingredients that makes this traditional method special but also the aroma of the smoke during the cooking process. For her, the combination of the smoky scent and the unique flavor imparted by the wood fire evokes memories of home. These accounts highlight how culinary culture is tied not only to ingredients and recipes, but also to the physical and material culture of cooking.

P13 shares that she particularly misses *dımdıma* and *oromo*, which are traditional Kyrgyz dishes. *Dımdıma* is typically made with layers of dough, meat, and vegetables, while *oromo* is a type of steamed dumpling usually filled with meat, vegetables, or potatoes and rolled. She explains that she has not been able to find these specific dishes in Ankara. When cravings arise, she turns to other types of dumplings or meat-and-dough-based dishes available in Central Asian restaurants in the city. Her account reflects a broader pattern among migrants: culinary substitution, where people seek out similar but not identical foods to fill the void left by the absence of home-cooked dishes.

Specific dishes themselves carry deep emotional and cultural resonance for many participants. Longing for "own food", particularly craving it at certain times, reflects an emotional connection to the homeland, and often specifically to one's own home, especially the childhood home. This indicates that food is embedded within an emotional landscape. P5 and P12 mention that they deeply miss their childhood taste, *carma*, a traditional dish made from dried barley or wheat that is pounded and then boiled. P5 explains that *carma* carries strong emotional significance for her, as it evokes not only memories of the homeland but also of her mother. In her mind, the dish evokes the memories of the act of watching her mother prepare it, and the environment of her childhood in Kyrgyzstan where such foods were part of daily life. Another commonly cherished and lodged dish among participants is *kuurdak*, a traditional fried meat dish with potato. P5 mentions that this dish is also strongly associated with her mother, who used to prepare it regularly at home. Another participant shares her reflection on food and memories of home is P7. She explains that eating *samsa* with tea brings back vivid memories of the village where she lived with her grandmother: "*While eating samsa with tea,*" she says, *"I can feel the atmosphere of the village, it's as if I'm there again*."

Like them, P13 shares a cherished memory about *mantı*, a dish that for her is deeply tied to the feeling of celebration at home. She explains that whenever *mantı* is made in her household, it evokes the atmosphere of *bayram* marked by joy and family togetherness. P13 states this as follows:

> *"When mantı is made in our family, it feels like bayram. Everyone is happy. My father is especially happy. Because making mantı is a bit difficult to prepare… and it also requires a*

lot of meat… So, we do not make it very often. And when it is made, it feels like a celebration for us. Everyone shares that feeling."

Mantı is also deeply tied to childhood memories of P3. He describes it as a dish that the whole family eagerly looked forward to, and something that brought them joy. When speaking about *mantı*, he recalls the warm, lively atmosphere of his childhood home, where his mother and sisters would prepare the dish together.

4. Encounters with Turkish Food: Realizing the Differences and Culinary Acculturation

For Kyrgyz migrants in Türkiye, migration has brought them into contact with a new culinary landscape, triggering moments of curiosity as well as creating unexpected challenges in adapting to unfamiliar tastes, ingredients, and food practices. For many, this encounter was marked by an initial realization of differences between the familiar tastes of home and the offerings of Turkish cuisine.

A commonly reported difference in culinary experience among participants concerns the taste of red meat in Türkiye. Although they come from various regions of Kyrgyzstan, participants consistently highlight this issue. Regardless of regional background, the divergence in taste emerges as a common point of disappointment. The sense of disappointment with the flavor is so strong that it leads some participants to avoid purchasing red meat altogether. Two participants, P1 and P2, mention that they refrain from buying red meat as much as possible because cooking it only results in frustration when the expected familiar taste is not met. P2 explains:

"*When you boil the meat, the broth does not taste the same here. Or it just feels that way to me, I do not know. But there is this difference. I can feel it. That is why I always buy chicken. For example, we usually make samsa at home with beef or lamb. But in Türkiye, I make it with chicken just because I cannot get that same taste. We cannot achieve that flavor with beef here*."

This reflection highlights how expectations, shaped by one's culinary upbringing, can turn everyday cooking into a source of dissatisfaction when familiar flavors are unattainable.

Similar complaints about the taste of meat came from all participants. P13 says "*Meat is tasteless here*." P5 after pointing out a similar point, explains this difference "*The lambs in our country are fed with fresh grass in the highlands and mountains. Therefore, the taste of meat in Kyrgyzstan is different from the taste here*." P3 shares a similar elaboration regarding the taste difference of meat in Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye:

"Honestly, I cannot enjoy the taste of the meat here at all. It is probably because of the way the animals are fed. For example, here the animals are usually raised on farms. They have not grazed freely or eaten natural grasses. Back home, our animals go up to the highlands."

P14 proudly emphasizes her regional identity by stating, "*I am from Naryn*" highlighting that the taste of meat from her homeland is uniquely distinct. She claims to recognize meat from Naryn solely by its flavor. According to her, this distinctive taste arises from the specific grasses on which the animals graze and the influence of the local climate in the region.

This deep connection between regional practices and taste is also stated by P15. She shares that the dish she misses most is *kuurdak*, a traditional fried meat dish deeply rooted in Kyrgyz cuisine. P15 expresses disappointment that *kuurdak* can never taste the same in Türkiye because the taste of meat here never matches what she remembers from her hometown. According to her, even if *kuurdak* is available at a restaurant or found elsewhere in Türkiye, it would not taste the same because the flavor of the meat cannot be replicated outside the context of her homeland. Another participant, P10, acknowledges that while there are Central Asian restaurants in Türkiye offering specialties from Kyrgyzstan, the experience is far from satisfying compared to the homeland. She explains: "*Yes, there are restaurants here where we can find the food, but it is still not like at home. It has a quite different taste when it is at home*." This sentiment is further reinforced by P4, who highlights not only the difference in meat taste but also critiques the local cooking methods. She points out that, in her view, the use of excessive spices in Türkiye overwhelms the natural flavor of the meat, stating: "*They are changing the taste of meat with too much spice*."

To cope with this longing about meat, one common strategy is to bring meat from Kyrgyzstan by freezing it for transport. However, not all participants are able to do this due to the practical difficulties of carrying and storing uncooked frozen meat. However, carrying pre-cooked meat is a common strategy. Participants report bringing prepared dishes like *kuurdak* or fried meat, which are cooked in advance to make them easier to transport in luggage and more suitable for storage. By doing so, they extend the shelf life of these dishes, sometimes storing them for up to one or two weeks.

Another issue highlighted by participants as a distinct feature of Kyrgyzstan's eating culture, in contrast to Türkiye, is the consumption of horse meat. It is understood that horse meat carries celebratory significance, often being prepared for important cultural events and special occasions. Additionally, it is also served during times of mourning, such as funeral condolences, reflecting its role in both festive and commemorative traditions.

While some participants were already aware of this cultural difference regarding the consumption of horse meat before migrating, others only became aware of it after arriving in Türkiye. P1 exemplifies the surprise of discovering this culinary difference only after arriving in Türkiye. Unaware that horse meat is not part of Turkish culinary traditions, he recounts his experience:

> *"Unfortunately, we can't find it (horse meat) in Türkiye… I did not know that horse meat is not consumed in Türkiye. I thought, well, they are Turkish, like us. I asked someone if they eat horse meat. We had just met and became friends. Then he was so surprised and said, 'How can you eat that? How could anyone eat such a thing?' I was shocked. I asked, 'How do you live without eating horse meat?' For us, in Kyrgyzstan, horse meat has a very important place."*

Like P1, P15 also mentions that she was unaware that horse meat is not consumed in Türkiye. She expresses a strong longing for horse meat, highlighting its cultural significance in her family and the absence she feels in her diet. P2 is another participant expressing a deep craving for horse meat, highlighting her emotional attachment to its taste, which she strongly associates with childhood memories of her village. P2 reports: "*I heard that in a village in Niğde, some Kazakhs live there, and they have access to horse meat. That is, they slaughter horses and have horse meat available. And they also sell it at an affordable price. Maybe I'll place an order*."

P3 also mentions that it is sometimes possible to obtain horse meat in Türkiye through Kazakh communities living in Niğde. However, he explains that doing so requires considerable effort and coordination. First, one must establish a personal connection with someone from the community, as these exchanges typically happen through trust-based networks rather than formal markets. Even then, access is not always available immediately. If no horse has recently been slaughtered, there is often a waiting period until fresh meat becomes available. After making contact and confirming availability, payment is usually sent in advance. Once the transaction is arranged, the meat is typically transported to the recipient, most often via intercity bus services.This process highlights the informal yet resilient networks that migrants rely on to access culturally important foods that are otherwise unavailable.

Due to availability issues in Türkiye, the most effective way to satisfy the craving for horse meat is to bring it directly from Kyrgyzstan. P1, who deeply misses horse meat, after discovering how rarely it is found in Türkiye, brought some in his luggage from Kyrgyzstan. He ensured it was frozen before traveling and carried it all the way with him. On another occasion, a friend brought horse meat from Kyrgyzstan, and they prepared it together with other Kyrgyz friends, sharing and enjoying the meal together.

Moreover *qazı* (a traditional sausage made meat) is also one of the most carried food items from Kyrgyzstan by luggages. P14 shares that she brings *qazı* with horse meat in her luggage, describing it as an incredibly special food item. She notes that horse meat is extremely difficult to find in Türkiye, and at times even impossible to access, which makes *qazı* with horse meat particularly valuable. She explains that she is intentionally saving it for a special occasion: a gathering planned after exams, where it will be served as part of a celebratory meal. Bringing *qazı* to celebratory gatherings carries symbolic meaning. It is a way to honor friends by sharing something so difficult to obtain.

Another product which is difficult to obtain in Türkiye is *kımız* (fermented mare milk). P2 states that *kımız*, which is unavailable for her in Türkiye, holds significant importance because its taste directly reminds her of her childhood and her grandmother. P1 also talks about *kımız* as a drink that he cannot find in Türkiye. For him, *kımız* is one of the missing parts of his ideal diet in Türkiye. To compensate this missing part P1 says he carried *kımız* and provide it whenevere he finds any friend who accepts to bring it. P1 reported that he heard some Kyrgyz people talks about a place in Antalya where they can find *kımız*, however he does not believe that its taste would be the same with Kyrgyzstan because he explains "*The quality of kımız depends on the horse. The quality of kımız depends on where the horse grazed and what types of grasses it ate*." P1 also pround of his region, Naryn, saying its *kımız* is the best and famous in Kyrgyzstan, this makes it impossible for him to compare any *kımız* in Türkiye.

P3 also states that it is impossible to find any *kımız* that tastes like it does in Kyrgyzstan, as it is so closely tied to the specific environment and traditional production methods there. However, he is aware of the existence of a Kyrgyz village in Van's Erciş district, namely Ulupamir, where the Kyrgyz diaspora community preserves traditional practices. P3 mentions this possibility, stating: "*You may contact them and find kımız, but it never tastes like the kımız in Kyrgyzstan*."

P5 misses the taste of *kımız* stating that it is difficult to find in Ankara and difficult to bring it to Türkiye. Upon being asked what if she can drink it now, she answers: "*That taste would take me to the highlands. To Talas. Because that is where I first drank it or drank it the most. That is why I would get the taste of the highlands. It felt like I was walking in Talas. I could even smell the horse there. You know what I mean?*" Another participant who speaks about missing *kımız* and its strong connection to memory is P15. She shares, "*If I could drink kımız from Kyrgyzstan now, I would be very happy, it would remind me of the days in the highlands."* For P15, the distinctive taste of *kımız*, associated with summer days she spent in the highlands, evokes a sense of freedom, and closeness to nature. Another participant P11 also talks about the importance of *kımız* for Kyrgyzs in Türkiye and say "*When someone brings kımız from Kyrgyzstan. I mean, it is a wonderful thing—you know, it has that distinct smell. Even just that smell reminds you of the horses and the highlands there.*"

Not only *kımız* but also *sağmal* (fresh mare's milk) appeared in the statements of some participants as one of the missing parts of their culinary culture in Türkiye. Coming to Türkiye means losing access to certain foods that are deeply connected to land, season, and immediacy. *Sağmal* is a notable example because its consumption is believed to be most effective for health when drunk immediately after milking, especially while still warm. Without the rural, pastoral setting that enables this practice, participants find themselves cut off from it. This absence reflects a broader challenge faced in migration: the loss of foodways that rely not just on ingredients, but on ecological and seasonal conditions that cannot easily be recreated elsewhere.

4.1. Delightful and Unfamiliar Tastes of Türkiye

Data from the study reveal that while participants maintained a strong attachment to Kyrgyz food, they gradually engaged in a process of acculturation as they began trying, accepting, and in some cases developing a liking for Turkish dishes. Migration brings participants into contact with foods they had never encountered before, leading to moments of surprise and, sometimes, curiosity. While some participants expected similarities due to the shared cultural and historical ties between Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye, many described feelings of surprise, even shock, upon discovering how distinct some Turkish foods are from those of Kyrgyzstan.

P3, recalls one such experience shortly after arriving in Türkiye, when a friend introduced him to okra, a vegetable completely unfamiliar to him. He vividly remembers his reaction: "*I could not believe it. I said, 'How can these people eat this?'*" Similarly, P9 recounts her surprise upon seeing how green beans being consumed in Türkiye: "*You call it taze fasulye (green beans), I mean the green part. We never eat it the way you do. We used to give that green outer part as feed to sheep and cows. There is a special machine that chops it up, and that is how we used it. I was really surprised that people eat it like this. I still do not eat it*." For P8, the food she finds most unusual is *aşure*. She explains, "*It is so strange to me that it is sweet, sour, everything mixed. I still cannot imagine myself eating it. And there are beans inside a dessert—how is it possible? It really surprises me*." P4 is another participant who expresses surprise at certain Turkish foods, describing *çiğ köfte* as particularly strange and noting, "*I am still surprised that people eat it*." In contrast, participants like P16 shared that although *çiğ köfte* seemed very unusual at first, over time she has developed a liking for it. However, she also points out a broader culinary difference, saying, "*We do not use salça (tomato paste). The thing I hate the most here is salça. In Türkiye, dishes are made with salça*."

Sarma (stuffed grape leaves) is among the most frequently mentioned foods that participants found surprising. P2 remembers the first time of seeing *sarma*, she says "*I said, how leaves can be cooked like that, this is very different*". P11 recalls her first encounter with *sarma* as a moment of surprise and curiosity. "*You know stuffed grape leaves (sarma). Since I had never eaten anything wrapped in leaves before, I asked if you're supposed to remove the leaves before eating it*." For them, the idea of consuming food wrapped in leaves was entirely unfamiliar. Over time, some participants became accustomed to *sarma* like P14, while others, like P15, continued to refuse to eat it.

One notable commonality in describing differences between the culinary cultures of Türkiye and Kyrgyzstan is related to soups. All the participants note that the soup culture in Türkiye is quite different from what they were accustomed to in Kyrgyzstan. Although they appreciate and enjoy the wide variety of soups available in Türkiye, they continue to long for the familiar tastes of home, often emphasizing the significant role that soups play in their own

culinary traditions. P11 exemplifies this sentiment. She describes the way soup is prepared in her family: *"We just add water to the meat, then put in potatoes, onions, and carrots, and we boil it like that, simmering it, and then we drink the broth. I really miss that soup—it is so delicious. When I drink it, I get this feeling inside... I don't know, it just feels like something special."* P15 highlights another aspect of Turkish soup culture that many participants find unusual: she is surprised using lentils and chickpeas in soups, which differs from her own culinary traditions.

Just as soup occupies a significant role in Kyrgyz food culture, rice also holds significant importance. This is particularly evident in the case of plov, with all participants reporting culinary differences between Türkiye and Kyrgyzstan in its preparation. All participants highlighted that rice culture in Türkiye differs significantly from that of Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia in general. Plov is described as a seperate dish, rather than a side dish as rice is often perceived in Türkiye. Participants emphasized that replicating the authentic taste of plov in Türkiye is challenging due to the difficulty in sourcing specific ingredients. Even when dining at Central Asian restaurants, they frequently note that the flavor does not fully match the one from their homeland. While basmati or jasmine rice are commonly used substitutes, participants unanimously agree that these alternatives fail to capture the distinct flavor and texture of the original dish. A clear example of this comes from participants from the Jalal-Abad region and Osh in Kyrgyzstan, who mention Lazur rice which is a long-grain variety prized for its distinct texture and cooking qualities. Participants emphasized that what makes Lazur rice particularly special is its ability to maintain a firm, separate grain structure after cooking, preventing it from becoming overly soft or mushy. Another type of rice mentioned by the participants for preperation of Uzbek-style plov (*aş*) is Devzira rice, a variety known for its unique taste and characteristic light pinkish color. This point was particularly emphasized by participants from the Osh region, where the culinary culture is deeply intertwined with Uzbek traditions. They noted that this distinctive rice is produced in Uzgen, a region well known for rice cultivation, as well as in the fertile lands of the Fergana Valley. For them, Devzira rice is irreplaceable in their efforts to recreate the flavors of home.

For the participants, although familiar tastes provided comfort and a connection to home over time they began to explore, enjoy, and even appreciate the foods in Türkiye. Among these, *lahmacun* emerges as one of the most enjoyed dishes. Similarly, several types of kebabs are popular, with many expressing a particular appreciation for them. Additionally, *döner* is frequently mentioned as a favorite by many participants. Among participants another popular dish from Turkish cuisine is *içli köfte.* It is also observed that Kyrgyz migrants commonly share recommendations and exchange information about Turkish dishes that resemble or evoke the tastes of Kyrgyz cuisine. P14 shares that *içli köfte* was recommended to her by other Kyrgyz friends. Following their suggestion, she tried it with fellow Kyrgyz friends at a Turkish restaurant. Reflecting on the experience, she recalls, *"We said, yes, that's it!"* expressing their

delight at finding a dish that, while not identical, resembled familiar tastes from Kyrgyz cuisine. P14 emphasizes how meaningful it was to discover a food that felt both similar and distinct, evoking a sense of connection to home while also marking their adaptation to a new culinary environment. For P11 too, the dish that exemplifies her dietary acculturation is *içli köfte*, a food she had never tasted before migrating to Türkiye but began to enjoy after trying it. Beyond these commonly liked foods, participants also mentioned specific Turkish dishes they started to like after trying them. P14 says she enjoys *cağ kebabı*, as its flavor reminds her of lamb, a meat that is widely consumed in her homeland. She also mentions that she likes *cacık*, a cold Turkish dish made with yogurt, water, salt, and herbs. Although it is different from anything she used to eat back home, it still feels familiar to her because of its basic ingredients (yogurt, salt, and water) which are commonly used in Kyrgyz cuisine as well. What makes *cacık* distinct, she notes, are the added greens such as cucumber and dill. This combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar makes *cacık* an interesting and enjoyable experience for her. Another participant, P5, mentions *kelle-paça* (head and foot soup) as one of her favorite dishes in Türkiye, noting that its taste reminds her of *besh parmak*, a dish that all other participants also expressed longing for.

The peak of culinary acculturation is represented by P5, who not only became accustomed to Turkish tastes but also learned to prepare a variety of Turkish dishes through interactions with friends and neighbors. This elevated level of culinary acculturation in her case can be attributed to several factors: having access to her own kitchen and cooking equipment, which allows her to experiment with new recipes, and maintaining strong social ties with Turkish neighbors who introduce her to local food practices. Through learning about Turkish dishes, she has significantly expanded her personal cooking repertoire. Her engagement with local food traditions has even led her to learn how to prepare *tarhana*, a fermented and dried soup mix widely used in Türkiye for winter consumption. She appreciates not only its taste but also the convenience it offers as a quick, nourishing meal. She even mentions that if she returns to Kyrgyzstan, she hopes to teach other women in her family how to make it, because she sees it as a valuable and practical addition to their food traditions back at home.

5. Accessing Kyrgyz Food and Ingredients: Luggage Transport, WhatsApp Networks, and Ethnic Stores

All participants in the study carry food in their luggage from Kyrgyzstan to Türkiye. Participants reported that after spending some time in Türkiye, they gained experience about what they could and could not access in Ankara, leading to changes in the composition of their luggage. They also became more aware of which local ingredients could serve as suitable substitutions for those unavailable from Kyrgyzstan. For instance, P1 initially brought spices from Kyrgyzstan in case he could not find them in Ankara. However, after discovering that

spices were readily available, he stopped bringing them. Similarly, he once brought mashed tomato sauce from Kyrgyzstan but later realized that Turkish tomato *ezme* could serve as a suitable substitute. Eventually, he concluded that it was not worth the effort to bring certain items from Kyrgyzstan when comparable alternatives were accessible in Türkiye.

Kurut (dried curds) is a common item brought by everyone, even by those who do not personally enjoy its taste. They bring it as a symbolic item from home and often offer it to friends as something familiar and culturally meaningful. *Kurut*, made by salting and drying under the sun, is exceptionally durable. Its solid form makes it easy to transport, which adds to its practicality as a travel item. Participants report that they have never encountered a food in Türkiye that replicates *kurut*'s distinctive taste and texture, making it especially important to bring from Kyrgyzstan. *Tıbıt*, a version of kurut flavored with pepper, is also mentioned as one of the items brought. Another type noted by a participant is apricot *kurut*, which carries a slightly sweet-and-sour flavor.

Other commonly carried items in luggage include tea in its various forms, such as black tea, green tea, and diverse types of herbal teas. Another frequently mentioned item is honey, which is often carried from the homeland. Although honey is readily available in Türkiye, participants often describe the taste of honey in Türkiye as noticeably different from what they are accustomed to in Kyrgyzstan. Their concern is not only about finding 'real honey', meaning pure honey that is free from added sugar or commercial processing, but also about reclaiming a familiar taste. Participants emphasize the uniqueness and superior quality of Kyrgyz honey, describing it as exceptionally rich and flavorful, with a distinct taste that they associate with the specific flora, climate, and natural environment of their homeland. Its distinct taste, they note, sets it apart from the varieties commonly found in Türkiye. According to them, Kyrgyz honey is considered so valuable that it is sometimes brought as a gift when traveling abroad, especially for loved ones or respected individuals. Moreover, during times of illness, Kyrgyz honey is not only appreciated as a food item but also used for its traditional medicinal properties.

Another important food item that several participants reported bringing from Kyrgyzstan is *sarı may*, a type of clarified butter traditionally used in Kyrgyz cuisine. Its dense, concentrated form makes it suitable for long-distance transport, and its ability to remain intact and safe to eat for a long time makes it easy to store even without refrigeration. Participants describe its taste as unique and exceptionally rich, often noting that it differs significantly from related products available in Türkiye. Its portability and durability make it one of the most practical food items they choose to carry across borders.

Some traditional meat-based home-made products are also carried in luggages, and most commonly mentioned one is *qazı*. But some participants carry frozen meat too, sometimes for themselves but sometimes as gifts to friends. Some other traditional dishes like *boorsok*

(deep-fat fried bread chunks) and *çakçak* (a traditional Kyrgyz sweet made from fried dough) also carried from homeland as pre-cooked. Some participants reported bringing *Sgushchyonka* (sweetened condensed milk), known as *süt reçeli* in Turkish, from Kyrgyzstan. They describe it as a nostalgic taste from their childhood, and an everyday treat in Kyrgyzstan but far less common in Türkiye. Some others carry dried fruits, particularly apricots and plum, and dried nuts. Clove and ginder are also carried for healing effects by some participants. *Tandır* bread, although it is not so durable, is carried to enjoy it when coming to Türkiye for a few days more.

Although it is not easy or convenient to carry *kımız* from Kyrgyzstan due to its liquid form, some participants said they still brought it because their Turkish friends were very curious about it. And sometimes they carried it to other Kyrgyz friends who could not go to homeland for a long time. Participants noted that *kımız* holds a unique symbolic and cultural significance. In Türkiye, *kımız* is widely recognized by name, often associated with Central Asian nomadic heritage. But most of the Turkish population has never actually tasted it. This makes *kımız* one of the most frequently requested items to try among the participants' Turkish friends and acquaintances, who often express curiosity about its taste.

In addition to traditional items, some participants also carry packaged *salam* from specific commercial brands in Kyrgyzstan. Although it is not homemade, they explain that its taste still reminds them of home. It holds value not only for its flavor but also for the cultural familiarity it represents. They bring chocolate and candy for similar reasons: it is easy to carry, does not spoil quickly, and offers a small yet meaningful connection to homeland. They also express that they distribute these chocolates and sweets among their Kyrgyz friends in Türkiye to offer them a taste of home.

One of the findings of the study is that members of the Kyrgyz community have established WhatsApp groups to coordinate the transport of food, goods, and documents between Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye. Within these groups, individuals share information about the amount of weight they can carry and their travel schedules, effectively creating an informal but highly functional immigrant network that facilitates the movement of culturally or practically significant items. Participants reported that the items most frequently transferred or requested for transfer included *kurut*, honey, horse meat, tea, *kımız*, *sarı may*, and various other homemade products. This system represents a practical strategy developed by migrants to overcome the limitations of accessing traditional foods, necessary products, and important documents. It was also observed that this form of transportation often involves a negotiated fee, depending on factors such as the type and weight of the items being transported. These networks operate based on mutual trust. The reliance on such informal systems highlights the adaptive capacities of migrants in addressing gaps left by formal market structures and commercial logistics services.

Another way to access culturally specific food products in Ankara is through ethnic grocery stores, which is a finding that emerged from several participants' accounts in this study. An ethnic store located in Sıhhıye, Ankara, offers a range of products from the post-Soviet region, including items from Russia and Central Asia that are familiar to many Kyrgyz migrants. Products such as *sgushchyonka* (sweetened condensed milk), several types of salami from Central Asia, and even *kurut* (although not the homemade version) can occasionally be found there. The store also stocks chocolates and candies like those from the participants' childhoods, sometimes even the exact same ones. Despite its relevance, not all participants were aware of this store or the specific items it offers, suggesting that access to such culturally meaningful foods can depend on community knowledge and information-sharing among migrants.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study contributes to a growing body of research demonstrating how food practices serve as a key site of identity construction and cultural negotiation in migratory contexts. In line with earlier work on the significance of home-cooked meals in migration settings, the experiences of Kyrgyz migrants in Ankara underscore that home food carries deep symbolic meaning. It functions as a marker of ethnonational identity and fosters emotional ties to both homeland and previous generations. Participants' reflections on craving and longing for traditional dishes, often intensified after migration, highlight that these foods are valued not merely for their taste but also for the emotional comfort and sense of belonging they evoke. The findings show that migration, by disrupting the routine availability of familiar ingredients, amplifies their symbolic and emotional significance for Kyrgyz migrants in Ankara. The absence of culturally specific items and traditional home-cooked dishes leads participants to recognize their importance. This realization becomes a way of defining what is considered "our own food" and what is not.

Findings point out that cravings for "our own food" often evoke the emotional warmth of childhood homes and familial care. The notion of being "full" takes on new meanings, encompassing emotional satisfaction and cultural rootedness. One of the findings of this study is that during periods of emotional strain, the consumption of familiar Kyrgyz flavors serves as a coping mechanism, offering a sense of stability, comfort, and relief rooted in the memory of homeland.

This study reveals how food becomes a central site for adapting to a new culture, as well as a medium through which Kyrgyz migrants in Ankara negotiate cultural continuity and identity. Acculturation is a dynamic process through which migrants adjust to a new cultural environment which often involves selective adaptation, in which individuals adopt certain elements of the host culture while preserving some components of their heritage. In the literature on food, this process is referred to as dietary acculturation, which describes how

eating habits shift in response to new social, economic, and material conditions in the host country. This study argues that the act of substitution, where migrants seek out familiar tastes or ingredients to replace those unavailable, is itself a reflection of cultural adaptation and illustrates how they actively negotiate dietary acculturation in response to structural constraints. Such substitutions are not merely practical solutions but also symbolic acts that affirm identity and belonging in the context of migration. In this study, participants' narratives underscore that local alternatives can sometimes partially substitute for traditional items, even if they do not fully replicate the original taste or meaning. However, certain foods remain deeply irreplaceable due to their specific qualities, often tied to the ecological and social environments of Kyrgyzstan. Even when a version of such items is available in Türkiye, it is often perceived as less authentic than in the homeland but sometimes, substitutions may work, even if they are not identical to what is found at home.

Migrants may begin to incorporate local food practices, but they also employ strategies to retain cultural continuity through food. The use of luggage transport, informal networks, and digital coordination via applications aligns with recent literature on migrant agencies and informal foodways. Findings of this study highlight that participants use informal networks and digital platforms like WhatsApp to access important ingredients. Even those who are not directly engaged in such exchange's express awareness of their significance, indicating how food practices bind migrant communities across borders. These informal networks reflect a form of agency, allowing migrants to overcome structural constraints while sustaining meaningful connections to their homeland.

The study reveals that the most effective way for participants to access culturally specific foods is by carrying them from Kyrgyzstan themselves or asking others to bring them. However, not all items are suitable for transport. For instance, *sağmal* must be consumed immediately after milking, making it impossible to carry. Others, like *kımız* can be transported but present practical challenges due to their liquid form. Ethnic stores also play a role in providing culturally significant foods and ingredients, although homemade versions are not available.

The findings also support previous studies that emphasize hybridity of food practices and selective adaptation. Participants wish to maintain core food practices, especially those tied to familial and regional traditions, even when these foods are no longer readily available. At the same time, they develop new affinities for certain Turkish dishes. This reflects a form of negotiated acculturation, in which participants wish to preserve and access traditional tastes while also adopting new ones. This process is shaped by factors such as ingredient availability, social ties, and access to kitchen facilities.

The data reveals a dynamic interplay between cultural preservation and adaptation. While some participants embrace newly discovered Turkish dishes, these practices do not

diminish the longing for home-cooked meals. Rather, they reflect a process of negotiation, where old and new tastes coexist. Although there is a sense of loss that gives rise to longing, participants actively seek to compensate for it by searching for alternatives and directly accessing specific ingredients and items, even when doing so is costly or labor-intensive, such as carrying them from Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, this process involves learning and adaptation, through which their culinary repertoire expands as they become familiar with new tastes and dishes.

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