

# LEXINGTON

## LEGACY

*How foreign-born chefs have transformed the city's cuisine*

By Margaret Littman



Chef Dan Wu

Horse pastures, such as these at Darby Dan Farm, can be found just outside downtown Lexington.

"Lexington is not just bourbon, basketball and horses," says Dan Wu.

Wu is one of Kentucky's favorite chefs, known for appearing as a contestant on season five of the FOX network's *MasterChef*, making a mean ramen and showing the country's foodies the diverse culinary scene of his home state.

Born in China, Wu moved to Lexington as a child, grew up there and later returned after living in San Francisco and New York City as a young adult. He opened Atomic Ramen in 2017, a popular ramen shop, and launched the *Culinary Evangelist* podcast in 2015, spreading the word about Lexington's immigrant food scene.

For those who love to travel by tasting new foods, meeting chefs and photographing, say, the perfect arugula pizza, the immigrant food scene in Lexington is a must-visit destination. A confluence of sociological and demographic factors

in the state's second-largest city have led to the opening of many restaurants that honor the traditions of their chefs' heritage.

### Bringing World Flavors to Lexington

In 1988, Toyota opened an automobile manufacturing plant about 12 miles from downtown Lexington. Today, that facility is Toyota's largest factory in the world, attracting not only Japanese expats but also Chinese automakers and Korean suppliers. Kentucky, in general, and Lexington, in particular, is horse country, and many migrant workers

and immigrants are employed at these horse farms. And, refugees have been settling in Kentucky for decades.

In fact, the state is fifth in the US in refugee arrivals, according to Kentucky Refugee Ministries. Refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in particular, have made Lexington home since the late 1990s.

Alma Kajtazovic, who, along with her sister Selma Sulejmanagic, owns Sorella Gelateria, originally came to Lexington as a refugee from Bosnia.

Because of Lexington's cultural diversity, the city is like a giant food hall. "Whatever you are looking for, we have it, it is good, and it is owned by an immigrant," Kajtazovic says.

In addition to Wu's ramen and several immigrant-owned ice cream shops, including Kajtazovic's, there's West African cuisine and Sicilian pizza made by a West African whose eatery, Eiffel Pizza, is Siri's first response when you ask what the best pizza

is in Lexington. And then, there's Kentucky Mex, Mexican food made by Kentuckians originally from Mexico.

The reigning queen of Kentucky Mex is Laura Patrick Ramirez, who won the Southern Foodways Alliance's 2017 Ruth Fertel Keeper of the Flame Award.

She immigrated to Kentucky in 1985 so that her husband, Alberto, could work in the horse industry. In 1997, they opened their first restaurant: Tortilleria Y Taqueria Ramirez, lauded for its burritos and tortillas.

Steven Alvarez, a writer and professor at St. John's University in New York City, moved away from Lexington in 2016, yet he still waxes poetic about the Ramirez tortillas. He notes that the tortillas are made from local corn that the Ramirez family cooks, grinds, mixes and presses. The corn is milled at Weisenberger Mills, a sixth-generation family-owned business better known for its grits, a food you might more readily associate with

Kentucky than tortillas.

"[Tortilleria Y Taqueria Ramirez] was my special place," Alvarez says.

When Alvarez, known for teaching a "taco literacy" course about the foodways of Mexican immigrants in the US, moved to Lexington in 2014 from New York, he was skeptical that he could find the foods he wanted.

"The Mexican food was much better than I anticipated," he says, not only at Tortilleria Y Taqueria Ramirez but also at taquerias that encircle the city. Alvarez is a fan of the Aquascalientes supermarkets, which have locations all over town, each

with its own taqueria. The products in each store vary, as one may focus on Mexican foods while others highlight dishes and ingredients of Colombian or Salvadorean provenance.

Alvarez believes that many Latinx immigrants came to Lexington because they saw that there were more opportunities than in bigger cities where the labor market might have been saturated.

### Immigrant Inspiration

For Mohamed Diop, owner of Eiffel Pizza, the path to entrepreneurship was circuitous. Diop emigrated from

Clockwise from top left: A dish of deliciousness from Tortilleria y Taqueria Ramirez; the Distillery District is home to one of two Crank & Boom Craft Ice Cream locations in Lexington; Crank & Boom's Bourbon Ball Sundae



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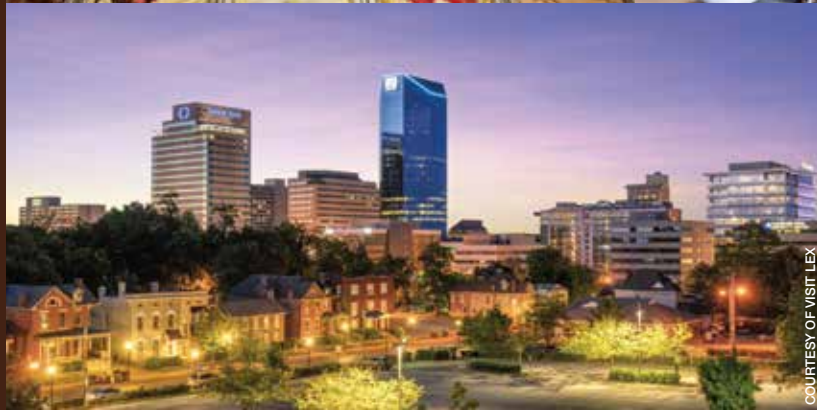


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Top row, from left: An appetizing selection of gelato at Sorella Gelateria; Mamadou Savané, owner of Sav's Restaurant and Gourmet Ice Cream; Laura and Alberto Ramirez of Tortilleria Y Taqueria Ramirez

Left: Lexington's dining scene has been enriched by immigrant chefs.



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Senegal in 2000 at age 25 and had worked for an oil company and as a taxi driver in Lexington. He wanted to open a restaurant but not one serving Senegalese food because, he says, West Africans traditionally cook at home. He wanted a cuisine that his African community in Lexington would support when they wanted to eat out. His sister lives in France and told him about a top Italian-run pizza-making school there. So, he went to Paris to learn to make Sicilian-style pizza to serve in Kentucky.

He was encouraged by Mamadou "Sav" Savane, owner of Sav's Restaurant and Gourmet Ice Cream. Savane had met his wife, Rachel, when she was a Peace Corps volunteer in Guinea, and he moved to Lexington with her. The couple raised a family, and Savane would bring West African dishes—recipes he learned from his mother and sister—to neighborhood block parties. Then in 2008,

two things happened: the recession hit, and Barack Obama was elected US president. Savane was inspired. "I had been thinking of doing this, and then, look what this guy did, he became president," says Savane. So he followed his dream and opened a restaurant.

Sav's Grill, his first restaurant, was near the University of Kentucky but had no parking. He also operated a separate ice cream shop nearby. In 2019, he moved to a different location with parking and combined both businesses. He recently converted those parking spaces to outdoor seating and a patio with plantings reminiscent of West Africa so that people would be able to eat outdoors during the pandemic.

Toa Green was the first person in her family born in the US. They moved from Thailand and opened their first restaurants when Green was seven years old. "I worked in the

'family farm'—that's what we called it—from the time I was 7 until I was 18," she says.

Green was inspired by sweet coconut ice cream carts in Thailand, so she opened an ice cream business in the back of her parents' restaurant, developing recipes by necessity. For example, one day the farmers whom they relied on for supplies had a surplus of sweet potatoes, so she made sweet potato pie ice cream. In 2011 and 2012, small-batch ice cream was becoming popular nationwide, so Green opened Crank & Boom Ice Cream as a stand-alone shop. And then a second location. And then a relocation during the pandemic.

Wu's Atomic Ramen temporarily closed during the coronavirus pandemic because the food hall that housed it was shuttered. His location on the University of Kentucky campus remains open, feeding students while he plans his next ramen-inspired move.

Ever optimistic about Lexington and its immigrant food scene, Wu says, "It is a midsized city. It is big enough for people to be into more interesting things but small enough to stand out."