

Bridges and Barriers: Exploring the Supports and Setbacks of Immigrant Owned Restaurants in
Somerville

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Introduction:

It seems fitting that my Urban Borderlands notebook, as I look back on it after the semester of work, is a jumbled mess of notes, reminders, quotes, sources, phone numbers, menus, interview questions and ideas. The work that we did as a class cannot be contained into a neat notebook of chapter-by-chapter notes out of the book, sectioned off and ready to be used to study for the final exam. A far cry from the usual college course, in Professor Deborah Pacini's fall 2011 Urban Borderlands class, our textbook literally was our experience out in the field, working with and learning from those whom we spoke with about restaurants around the city.

While the semester's project was at times scattered due to the very nature of our task it was ultimately productive and I learned that interviewing restaurant owners, or any small business owners, is quite a task, challenging and fulfilling all at once. Three necessities for success were: a reliable bike, a bit of pizazz, and a warm December. The bike I needed to get around the city; it proved quicker and more cost effective than public transit, especially with the 89 being nearly the only bus running to East Somerville from near Tufts, though not remarkably frequently. The 87 is the only one that goes far enough down Elm Street to be useful for what I needed, and again, isn't terribly predictable. Being able to meet restaurant owners and to move from place to place with freedom was a must for catching people when they would be in, waiting around, and moving to other locations in between visits to any given restaurant. I feel highly equipped to brief a new Somerville biker on effective routes and connecting routes from place to place.

Pizazz seems to be the best way to describe the combination of persistence, attitude and character needed to keep optimism flowing among setbacks. Between getting in touch with owners, staying in touch, technical and transportation difficulties; remembering to use everything

as a learning moment was key. I found myself breaking out of my comfort zone finding creative ways to get in contact with people, spending a lot of time in restaurants where I was often the only white person, and taking the time and effort to fully explain our project to restaurant owners with a goal of building enough trust to actually conduct useful interviews.

Finally, a warm December was important because it ended up taking much longer than expected to get interviews, and biking in the Boston snow would have probably proved dangerous, if not simply unpleasant. Luckily I was fortunate enough to have all three of these factors playing a role in my project, topped off by a supportive group of classmates, professor and teaching assistant.

As a junior American Studies major at Tufts I took this class hoping to engage with people in the community and upon recommendation from a friend who promised that very experience. On some level, I was uncertain about my ability to measure up to those who had been studying fieldwork for three or more years already as Anthropology majors. I had definite experience getting to know and working with members of the Somerville community through my years of volunteer work with LIFT Somerville, a national nonprofit with a mission of “combating poverty and expanding opportunity for all people in the United States,” (liftcommunities.org) where I got to form relationships with clients as we worked as a team to find housing, employment, public benefits, and other services for them. Through this program I had already gotten to know Somerville in a very different and more in-depth way than most Tufts students I knew and wanted to continue that by participating in Urban Borderlands. Despite the potential academic disconnect, I felt confident enough to proceed.

Our Class

As a class our goal this semester was to dive into the world of fieldwork, as most members of our class were Anthropology majors looking for relevant experience, and learn more about the process and experience of immigrant-owned restaurants in Somerville. We knew that we were going into this research at a time when Somerville was being advertised as an “immigrant city,” full of possibilities and full of all of the issues that come along with major change in a city: gentrification, branding, economic disparities, cultural differences, and more. In an effort to tackle the larger picture from multiple angles, we originally split into two groups as we started to look at the restaurant scene.

One group of students, titled the “Connectivity” group, was to focus on the more well-connected and well-established restaurants, maybe the chains or the popular and publicized ones. The other group, “Bridges and Barriers,” set out to focus on the restaurants owned by immigrants who had a bit less of an established business. Maybe these restaurants had been around for less time, were less well-known by mainstream Somerville, were struggling more to stay afloat in the economy. In either case, we found ourselves asking a lot of questions: What does it mean to be “connected”? Who is the mainstream? How can we judge which restaurants fit which category?

There was so much to focus on and our loosely assigned research groups eventually disbanded, leaving us to discover our own research interests and themes for our final project. After investigating a few other options, I ended up choosing to circle back to one of the original themes, bridges and barriers. About halfway through my interviews and during conversation with Professor Pacini, I realized that a lot of what I was most interested in related to the forces that were both helping guide my narrators towards success and those that were inhibiting or posing as challenges; essentially, the bridges and barriers. Since I had originally been a part of

this group earlier in the semester, I felt confident enough in changing the direction of my paper since I had already done some serious thinking about the topic.

The other major aspect of our classroom goals that is notable is the partnership we had with The Welcome Project, a local nonprofit working to build “the collective power of Somerville immigrants to participate in and shape community decisions” (welcomeproject.org). Working with the Welcome Project, we aimed to help promote the restaurants we visited by writing blog entries about them to be posted on the Welcome Project’s soon-to-be “YUM: A Taste of an Immigrant City” blog. This blog will act in conjunction with their “YUM” card program, which is a fundraiser selling cards that provide a discount at certified “YUM” immigrant-owned restaurants in Somerville, offering a ten percent discount on any purchases above twenty five dollars. Our blogs will soon be public and we anticipate that curious web surfers will find them useful when selecting a place to eat in Somerville.

Bridges and Barriers

Keeping in mind the class goals and our overarching connection to the Welcome Project, I set out on my own personal and academic journey this semester with my own goals. I was looking at the bridges and barriers; the supports that restaurants did or did not have, the problems that owners ran into, the people and things that were more helpful and the people and things that were most hurtful. I sought to find places willing to talk about their experience. At the beginning of the semester, since I was one of the people in our class able to do an interview in Spanish if needed, I visited more Latino restaurants. I considered making my theme also related more specifically to Latino restaurants, but as the semester drew to a close and I still needed more interviews, I ended up branching out of that theme a bit and deciding to have a broader

focus. Some of the bridges and barriers that most intrigued me about the Latino restaurants I had talked to were present in the other ones as well, while others were not, with different patterns coming up in the other restaurants.

Locating myself in this research, I was a relative outsider in many senses in most of the places where I interviewed. As a white, upper middle class female studying at Tufts, I have involvement neither with small business owners nor immigration in a personal sense. I have lived in Massachusetts my entire life and am only a resident of Somerville due to my student status. Studying restaurant owners who also happened to be immigrants, for the most part, in a rapidly gentrifying and changing city near Boston raised a lot of personal questions. It is intrusive to be trying to fit into this picture? Is that even what I am doing? What gives me the right to come into a restaurant, asking to take up an hour of a busy restaurant owner's time to ask them to share both their triumphs and their struggles, only so that I can then write a paper about it, also promising to blog about them? How much am I helping and how much am I hurting?

Continuing to grapple with these questions and power dynamics spanning race, education level, socioeconomic and immigration statuses, among other factors depending on the interview, I began to develop my own course of action and set of questions for research. I began to think more closely about the term "bridges and barriers" – what does that mean? As I worked to find out more, I asked owners about what was most helpful in establishing and maintaining the success of a business, or more specifically a restaurant. How did the narrators work on advertising? What were some of the biggest challenges? Who are their customers? What are their goals for the future? Learning these things and more, I have begun to grasp a bigger picture on the current experience of immigrant restaurant owners in Somerville.

My hope is that readers of this paper will begin to similarly question the experiences that immigrant owners of restaurants and small businesses and think more critically about the implications of facing bridges and barriers that go along with this process. I hope that this work helps start that questioning but at the same time I hope that it is only a start, because my only confident conclusion is that I cannot confidently conclude anything without further work, research, exploration and effort. I hope that any readers will see that too.

Theoretical Framework:

As Somerville's population consists of almost thirty percent immigrant individuals (US Census Bureau), we did reading related to immigrants and immigrant entrepreneurs this semester to help locate Somerville in the larger context of cities with a significant number of immigrant-owned businesses. Marilyn Halter, in a chapter titled "Tourists 'R' Us" focusing largely on ethnic tourism, points out that although Boston historically challenged its own positive reputation in the 1970s by exhibiting exceptional intolerance and racial conflict, the city seems to now be back on its liberal, diversity-friendly course, at least in some ways. She notes that, as of 2007, Boston is one of the only two "urban centres in the country that has a special mayor's office dedicated to its newest residents," and that office is called, "the Office of New Bostonians" (Halter 203). Entering the semester, we sought to find out whether the Boston area was holding up this promise of welcome to those who were new or once had been, but specifically to immigrants running restaurants.

Though the concept of ethnic tourism, highlighting "foreign" experiences that can be had relatively close to home, is not new, the intensity with which it has developed has rapidly been growing. Halter writes, "By the 1980s many urban immigrant enclaves had been transformed into tourist attractions resembling theme parks" (Halter 208). This dramatic portrayal of foreign

cultures as spectacles for the “American” eye to gaze upon is often problematic because it does not have the immigrants’ best interests in mind. This and other readings sparked class discussion on gentrification, the implications of immigration, branding and other topics concerning Somerville as an “immigrant city” located within a few miles of Boston.

Hall and Rath explore “Tourism, migration and place advantage,” discussing that immigrants involved in tourism usually either occupy lower skilled positions, “stratified along ethnic, racial and gender lines” (Hall and Rath 5) or are self-employed, motivated in most cases by “a view to becoming self-sufficient and achieving upward social mobility” (Hall and Rath 5). In *Ethnic Communities in Business: The Strategies for Economic Survival*, Jenkins and Ward echo this theory on immigrant entrepreneurial involvement, writing that self-employment is an attractive option for immigrant as a way of evading “peripheral firms characterized by a high degree of job insecurity and few benefits” (Jenkins and Ward 47). Instead of working in the largely white-dominated businesses, starting one’s own offers more freedom, independence and power.

They also discuss the effects of “ethnic enclaves,” defined as, “strong community support, based on ethnic ties, [that] allows small firms some degree of independence from the core communities” (49). They are known to provide security for the otherwise vulnerable immigrant owned establishments, and can take the form of both regionally local customers but also “communal solidarity,” or support that can span across areas, which I also saw in at least one restaurant this semester.

In her chapter entitled “Theorizing Immigrant Entrepreneurship,” María Eugenia Verdguer discusses social networks and, more specifically, social capital. She notes that a

business owner's social network plays a large role in the success of their business and that "relatively large and dense networks, with high levels of internal class differentiation, are the most effective at generating normative regulations, reciprocity expectations, and attitudes within a group" (Verdaguer 15). Clearly reaching as many categories of people as possible is most beneficial, and in order to do that owners must branch outside of their own networks in most cases. By "successfully interact[ing] with others who belong to different institutional circles," business owners can "increase the flow of information and resources available to the network and the community as a whole" (Verdaguer 15). Easier said than done, this strategy takes planning, knowledge and persistence.

Social capital, which is different from networking though related, deals with whether or not the resources that an individual is able to mobilize helps or hurts them. In essence, "individuals are able to mobilize resources (information, financial assistance, personal favors, etc.) whether they are rich or poor; the difference is that while the social capital of certain networks advances individuals' goal-seeking behaviors, that of others' might constrain, derail, or impede members' access to opportunity structures of high quality" (Verdaguer 16). Often confused with the "ability to access quality resources," (Verdaguer 16) social capital also considers the effects of one's networks in a real situation.

Thinking deeper about the concept of social capital, Verdaguer introduces two different ways in which businesses can put their social capital to work. Bonding and bridging, two related concepts, vary in that, "while bonding social capital promotes feelings of social belonging, trust, and reciprocity within a closed circle of family and friends, bridging social capital facilitates members' connections to groups and institutions beyond their closest circles" (Verdaguer 16). She explains that bridging "may facilitate access to valuable resources outside the immediate

community, including information about jobs, services, and other assets” (Verdaguer 16).

Bonding definitely has its own benefits, namely “strengthening social cohesion, group trust and collective identity” (Verdaguer 16). Naturally, a combination of the two is considered best, as “most scholars coincide that networks that want to improve their members’ socioeconomic standing are best served by both their ability to maintain group cohesion, solidarity, and internal trust, as well as by capitalizing on bridging connections to others who control valuable assets” (Verdaguer 16-17). Thinking about using social capital in either or both ways was a large part of analyzing the bridges, barriers, and effects of both on the restaurants I visited.

The original task of the “Bridges and Barriers” class research group was to study the “mom and pop” restaurants, the smaller, less economically connected and more vulnerable establishments. In doing a bit of reading on mom and pops, I found Robert Spector’s “The Mom and Pop Store: How the Unsung Heroes of the American Economy are Surviving and Thriving.” Clearly his opinion of mom and pops is a positive one, as he describes the owners as “authentic entrepreneurs who create, organize, operate, and assume the risk for their business ventures,” (Spector 3) noting that they must fill the roles of “financier, buyer, merchandiser, bookkeeper, bill collector, adviser, referee, good neighbor, and community pillar” (Spector 3-4). I saw a lot of this among those who I spoke with this semester; a lot of owners exhibiting what Spector calls the “seven shared qualities” of owning a mom and pop establishment. With the most important one listed last, the qualities are as follows: a desire for independence, a “distinctive entrepreneurial belief that what they are doing is special, passion, persistence, a willingness to work hard and do whatever it takes to get the job done, a connection to their community and an ability to adapt to change” (Spector 7).

As I saw the business owners I met fitting this description, often almost exactly, I began to think about the implications of this lifestyle. With ninety percent of all businesses in the United States being family owned or controlled (Spector 3), how distinct were the experiences of the restaurant owners I spoke with who fell under the “mom and pop” classification? Working against the odds; statistics showing only a third of mom and pops surviving past the second generation, half that reaching the third and only three percent making it past four generations; mom and pops have added barriers undeniably. I would imagine that many, given the family connection, have strong social ties helping them last. Spector points out that those who are in this business are not in it to make millions, but more for “contentment and making an honest living” (Spector 7). Combining the experience of a mom and pop with that of being an immigrant produces a unique experience full of bridges and barriers. The stories of the owners to follow demonstrate this mix.

Methodology:

As mentioned, my personal overarching goal was to find out more about the bridges and barriers acting upon the potential success of the restaurants I talked to. My research took place from September 2011 through December 2011, all in Somerville, Massachusetts. I found the restaurants largely by wandering around and looking for them. I would scope out a restaurant, making sure that it was not one already claimed by a classmate, and enter for my “informational visit,” the initiation step in the route towards getting an interview.

This primary visit usually consisted of eating at the restaurant, either alone or with a friend, and asking if the owner was around to talk with for a moment. If not, I would explain my project briefly as a “school project” for which I needed to “interview restaurant owners in Somerville.” I figured this was specific enough to give them an idea, yet vague enough so that it

would not be a complicated message to leave. I would then either ask to leave a note or ask if the person I was talking to could deliver a flier to the owner. I would either write my contact info on a flier, of which I had English and Spanish copies and left the appropriate one or both, depending on what I felt would be most useful having observed the restaurant for a bit or on what the person I was talking to said, or I would leave a note on a piece of paper if I did not happen to have fliers with me. I would ask when the owner would probably be around and leave in my note that I would be coming at that time, if possible.

If I did get the opportunity to talk to an owner during my informational visit, I introduced myself and explained that I was doing a project for school interviewing restaurant owners in Somerville. I did not want to make any assumptions about whether or not owners were immigrants, yet I had a list of immigrant-owned restaurants in Somerville provided by Rachel Plitch, who was at the time working with The Welcome Project to expand the number of places participating in the YUM card. Directed by this list, but also exploring uncharted restaurants, I had a vague sense of who might be an immigrant, but did not want to offend anyone or falsely assume, so I started off by simply saying that I wanted to interview restaurant owners. I knew that it would be equally fruitful to interview non-immigrant restaurant owners as well in order to have a comparison group and because more information about the restaurant scene was always better. I decided early on that it was not worth the awkward and insensitive citizenship questioning and that I could easily avoid that by interviewing as many people as possible, making “Please state your name, birthplace and name of your restaurant” my first question across the board.

Depending on the circumstances of the informational visit, I would either follow up by going in when I said that I was going to, to see if I could make contact with the owner or by

proceeding in whatever agreed upon way that the owner and I had decided. It sounds quite simple, but often took over ten visits to secure an interview, and some restaurants did not work out in the end because I couldn't even seem to make the initial contact regardless of how many times I approached the restaurant or visited. The process of trying to get an interview differed, often drastically, from place to place, and was relatively unpredictable.

In one case, I continually talked to an owner's husband, who was enthusiastic about the idea of the interview and thrilled that I would be able to conduct it in Spanish; yet every time I went to the restaurant over a span of three months, I never once ran into the owner and the husband never gave me a direct way to contact her. Despite the well-received offer, no interview ever happened for me at that location. Others responded very differently, one man telling me outright that he wanted nothing to do with an interview and had enough publicity already. I of course honored his request, but felt badly because when I looked online, most of the postings about that particular place were considerably negative and I was thinking that some good press might have gone a long way for his business, or at least helped counteract what I saw already on the internet. I wonder if he is aware of this or if he was just skeptical to have me coming in asking about an interview.

For the most part, the beginning stages of interview-hunting were slow and I will detail the processes of finding interviews at the places I ended up finding them at in a later section. Once an interview was planned, it became time to hope that the owner would be able to keep the appointment, barring any unforeseen barriers or scheduling changes, and it was time to get into the real interview planning stages. Apart from the standard biographical questions, I altered each of my interviews to match up with the owner and the restaurant where I would be asking them. I made sure to ask about things specific to certain restaurants, things I had seen or experienced that

I had questions about, or things that the owner had previously mentioned but had not yet explained entirely. Making sure to formulate the interview in a personal and specific way resulted in more thorough interviews where the narrators could tell that the questions were meant for them instead of solely generic.

At the actual interview, after probably having followed up and clarified whether it would be alright to record and use the interview for my project, the first step was to chat and find an appropriate spot to interview that was not too loud. Once settled, we would test the equipment, go over the consent forms, make sure that the narrator's questions were answered, and begin. After the interview, we would talk a bit more and the narrator would sign the consent forms as long as they were comfortable doing so.

After the interview, I thanked the narrator, usually took some photos, and left. I have been back to most of the places that I interviewed since, as a customer. After the interview was done, I transcribed the audio files into Word documents ready to be read by classmates and posted on the Tufts Digital Collections and Archives, or DCA. I wrote interview reports about each interview, which consisted of the following sections: an explanation of my goals going into the interview, the type of restaurant, a physical description of the restaurant and surrounding area, a brief bit of biographic information, an overview and summary of the interview itself, reflections on how it went and an analysis of how it contributed to my research, concluding with future steps.

Then I could begin to use what I had learned and apply in both in my next interview and in the larger context of our class. Throughout the semester, we read articles related to the issues that we were learning about as we talked to owners and we had some productive discussions

about what the work we were doing meant. By the end of the semester we had written at least two blog entries, conducted at least four interviews, worked on our projects and other assignments and were ready to present our work. We held a gathering to present our work and continued on the final stretch of writing and editing to conclude a hard semester of work.

Coming into junior year, I did not know much about Anthropology, restaurants, or owning a business. I had taken one Anthropology class where I generally learned that this discipline is the study of humans; how they live and how they interact. I knew less about restaurants and have always felt a bit unsure of myself whenever I find myself eating in anything fancier than a pizza place. Growing up, I very rarely went out to eat with my family so I have always felt a bit behind in the “restaurant etiquette” aspect of life. That was not a huge setback, however, because only one of the places I went to was a traditional, strictly sit-down restaurant.

In the beginning of the semester I mainly walked from place to place, as I was used to walking to and from the LIFT office and enjoyed walking around Somerville, watching the scenery change as I traveled in and out of different parts of town. As time went on, I sometimes took the bus and eventually switched almost entirely to biking in the interest of time. These three transportation experiences gave a fuller picture of the areas where I was interviewing and helped give more perspective to my research.

That is not to say, however, that I believe that what I have learned and found is anywhere near complete. Our work as a class was limited by time constraints and by inexperience with this manner of researching and I know that my research was certainly not an exception. I am proud of and intrigued by what I was able to discover but know that the learning and research is not done here. Looking back, there are already countless things that I could have done better and

there are things that I wish I had asked, done, or omitted. Overall, my biggest learning with this project is that there is more than meets the eye to owning and operating a restaurant. Being an immigrant adds another dimension of complexity and operating a business in Somerville is also a notable factor. For the remainder of my report I will introduce the restaurants and people I was able to meet, discuss my thoughts and theories on what their experiences could mean, and suggest areas for future research for myself and others to continue. Please keep in mind that since a lot of my project centers around observation and the actual interviews, it is largely interpretation and opinion based and I do not intend to claim my conclusions as fact.

Chapter One: Aguacate Verde

In early October, I ate a late lunch at Aguacate Verde on Elm Street, a restaurant that I had been curious about for a while and had never really found a reason to try out. The location, vaguely close to Porter Square and on the way to Union Square, but not in a place that gets a distinct amount of foot traffic as far as I can tell, is interesting for a small Mexican restaurant, but that's what the space was used for under its last ownership as well. Before going in for the first time I looked up the restaurant online and found out that the owner, Silvia de La Sota, is an immigrant who has started this restaurant recently, among many other accomplishments.

Walking there, I passed through Davis Square, noticing the bustling shops and other businesses only minimally, for I was focused on my end destination. I always enjoy the sight of the church on the right as soon as I have cleared the Davis threshold, past Citizens Bank and across Russell Street. The Urban Promise church on the right always seems to have a positive vibe and reminds me of one of the main reasons I love walking throughout Somerville: the diversity of people, experience, language, and sights that unfold from street to street. I'm always ready to explore a new area, but this particular route down Elm Street until it turns into

Somerville Ave has been a familiar favorite for the past three years. The traces of Davis linger to my left as I pass Wings over Somerville, Domino's Pizza, Pulse Café, Subway, and the new Posto restaurant.

Passing into a residential stretch of the road, I will occasionally run into a serious walker, equipped with the proper strap-on water bottle or other gadgets. Sometimes parents and babies stroll by, joggers make their way along, commuters head to a bus stop on their way to work, bikers whiz past; depending on the time of day, I get to see all sorts. Continuing like this for a few minutes, enjoying the friendly apartment scenery and taking comfort in having just begun my walk, I can relax. The next major landmark, however, is a bit of a stressor, depending on the time of day. Crossing Beech Street, the small road connecting Elm Street to Massachusetts Avenue, can be a task among hurried commuters, buses turning the corner, bikers, strollers, and other factors. Sometimes I am able to hit it just right and other times I end up running to avoid a collision, but once I make it across, I am safe until I near the Porter Square Shopping Mall.

The bike shop with the friendly staff is immediately across the street to my left, and walking further I soon pass Shaw's in the Porter Square Shopping Mall, often walking right by the 87 bus stopped letting people off. I always take a moment to admire both Eddie's new and used furniture, wondering which is which as it seems that all of his furniture sits out on the sidewalk outside his store, waiting to catch the interest of passerby. Next comes JFK Elementary, then just houses for bit. As usual I recognize all of the street names I have grown used to hearing on the bus: Mossland Street, then Linden; sometimes I can't help but replay the sounds in my head of that robotic MBTA voice announcing each stop. Mossland is probably my favorite; I love the quirky pet shop on my left with its spiders and snakes on display in the window, the exterminator's office with the huge plastic bug above its door, Lucky Market

advertising the slush that they sell which I've always meant to stop and try, and the crowded little intersection where I always wonder if I can sneak by, running across the street when I don't see a car coming down the Mossland hill. Rarely am I in such a hurry that I need to do this, but this stretch of the journey always seems to be the longest so I try to liven it up.

It's nearing time to cross the street when I walk by the apartment complex, the "Rental Experts" office, and the Showcase Laundromat. Aguacate Verde, at 13 Elm Street, is across from the Laundromat, the Subway, the Starbucks, and the Cumberland Farms gas station. It is on the corner of Elm Street and Porter Street, just before Elm turns into Somerville Ave. The spot is certainly car-heavy at times, but is less than a foot-traffic hotspot. Only about two and a half blocks up from Porter, and neighbored by a skate shop that must attract some foot, or slower-than-car wheel traffic, it seems to be an alright location. I am interested to hear what Silvia will say about it.

Ready to enter, I gaze at the small corner restaurant with its bright green outer signage contrasting the tan building color, 87 bus stop directly outside the door, and large front windows that seem to be letting in a lot of light. Behind the restaurant is a residential area and in the doorway Silvia has posted information about the hours and restaurant's special events, including Tamale Sundays and Karaoke Thursdays. I can already see her inside sitting with a new employee whom she was training so I step up the three stairs, through the door and inside. After a greeting and ordering my chicken quesadilla, I sat waiting in a seat by the window, notebook out and ready to write down anything of interest, all the while diligently pretending to be studying.

Silvia, it turned out, was very welcoming and as I sat eating my food she came to ask how it was. We talked a bit about the food and I told her how I had seen her restaurant online and wanted to interview her for our project. I explained more about it and gave her the flier of information about our project with my contact information written on the bottom. She wrote down her name for me so that I could Google it to re-read the article about her story so that I would have things to ask about. We planned to meet a few days later, Friday the seventh 2:30pm.

Coming back for the second time, I paid careful attention to the interior. Inside, the establishment is decorated brightly and with informal decorations, including sombreros hanging from the walls, party streamers in the form of a string of plastic triangles above the cash register area, and a paper sign draped over the doorway to the kitchen, each letter of the word “Fiesta” strung together to span the top of the doorway. There is a Mexican flag in the window and a generally festive but casual decorating atmosphere in the building. There are about six tables to your right as you walk in and two more to your left, where the karaoke machine, television and boom box also are. In addition, there is a pair of maracas hanging by the grouping of two tables, and that part of the restaurant leads to the back area where the food is stored and there is a sink for customer hand washing and bathrooms for both customers and employees.

There is a Coca-Cola refrigerator filled with soda and another, generic, refrigerator stocked with Jarritos and other El Salvadorian drinks, according to Silvia. These two fridges flank the counter where guests order their food and above which the menu is posted. There is also a menu with more options and more details posted on the counter, printed out on 8 ½ by 11 pieces of paper. One can see right into the kitchen area which is nice because customers can both watch employees cook and chat with them while they do so. Silvia often calls out to

customers as she makes their food, asking whether or not they would like certain ingredients, trying to effectively satisfy each customer's tastes. The restaurant is relatively small and is welcoming, with bright colors and a lot of sunlight inside during the day.

During the interview I learned that Silvia, who has always had a knack for cooking, opened Aguacate Verde this past May as a challenge and a way to connect with the community. Silvia's background ranges from Public Health to Social Work to karate, in which she is a black belt. Her restaurant management techniques are closely tied to her Public Health experience, given that she takes care to create food that is healthy for her customers. To give more full biographic details, Silvia De la Sota was born in Lima, Peru, and is now a resident of Somerville, MA. She came to the United States about 15 years ago, originally to compete in and teach karate but with goals of studying at Harvard. After doing all of this, plus working in both social work and public health, Silvia decided to start a restaurant in Somerville, and Aguacate Verde opened its doors on May 18th of this year, 2011.

Silvia's parents still live in Peru and speak Quechua, and the rest of her family is in Peru as well. Silvia came to the United States about fifteen years ago with hopes to eventually study at Harvard, originally moving to Las Vegas for a karate tournament and then to Florida to teach karate. Upon moving to Boston she began to work here as a social worker, something that she went to school for and practiced in Peru. She also took classes at Harvard extension school, doing exceptionally well in math. In her career path she moved from social work to public health, where she learned a lot of the nutritional information that she uses now for Aguacate Verde.

When she was laid off at her public health job she decided to start a restaurant because she wanted a challenge and had the opportunity to buy the space that Tacos Lupita, former Mexican restaurant at 13 Elm, was selling. She got a loan and did a lot of research about how to properly own and operate a restaurant, taking classes and talking to people to get as much information and as many opinions as possible. Though this process was complicated, she was up for it. She noted in our interview, “people say, ‘oh, it’s a lot of work,’ but I came to this country to take challenge[s], I didn’t come to this country to find somebody to pay my bills, you know? I like to work hard for what I want and I like new challenges and I think this is a good challenge. So far I am enjoying it” (de La Sota 10/7/11). Silvia’s unwavering determination, one of the supposed seven keys to owning a mom and pop, has been instrumental in the startup and continuation of her restaurant.

In terms of bridges, one of Silvia’s strongest is her educational background. She came to the United States already certified as a social worker and with other education as well, but continued her studies at Harvard Extension School and prior to starting a restaurant, took classes at local community colleges to ensure that she knew what she was doing. This advantage that she brings opens up a large number of possibilities for connections with others in business and also means that she is comfortable with navigating the higher education system in America. Perhaps this is why she felt comfortable making her target advertising audience local college students.

The City of Somerville has been quite a support for Silvia as well and she is grateful for their assistance. She recently got approval for the Storefront Improvement Program, a program run by David Guzmán, Somerville’s Economic Development specialist. According to the Omnibus Small Business Act of 1978, ten percent of all federal funding that goes towards local

public-works projects must go towards minority-owned businesses (Boston 205). The Storefront Improvement Program may fall under this category, as it is set up to help new and often immigrant-owned businesses in Somerville access the resources to redesign the image of their business. The program helps owners throughout the design process, using the city's architect and other resources to work with the owner, and later reimburses them for the expenses incurred during remodeling. Currently Silvia is in the middle of this process. She has shown me the new design plans, and when I went back for our second interview the interior and exterior of the restaurant had both already undergone changes according to the plans. In addition to that particular project, Silvia has had positive experiences with every city department she has worked with, from the clerk's office to the health inspector and the police.

For an entrepreneur starting her first business without a business partner, I was surprised at how connected Silvia is with various networks. It seems that she has become accustomed to reaching out to others for support, which has worked out well with the City of Somerville and outside organizations. She is clearly quite independent yet also understands that forming a network of support is crucial for owning and sustaining a business. Currently she is connected to the Center for Women and Enterprise, the City of Somerville, newspapers at Tufts and Harvard, LevelUp, L.A.U.G.H.S., Shape Up Somerville and other places, other restaurant owners, and education programs at Salem State and other places.

All of these connections are lending well to advertising as well. Silvia wants to target students in her advertising efforts and also wants to educate people about nutrition and healthy eating as she runs her business. Silvia is trying to connect with her clientele both on a food and a personal level. She talked about her goals of the restaurant being more than just feeding people and serving healthy food, but also to educate the public about Latin American culture and

promoting general health. She wants to “not only feed people but also educate them about nutrition, about healthy eating and about other issues related to their health” (de La Sota 10/7/11). She stresses making the food with “a lot of love,” and sees food as a way to share her culture, “but also to show that we care about people’s health and well-being.” (de La Sota 10/7/11).

Silvia is in contact with the Tufts and Harvard school newspapers, actively seeking out those whom she hopes to draw into her restaurant. The Tufts Daily gets food from Silvia once a week and has also agreed to advertise for her in their paper. Working with outside organizations for advertising has been a strategy that Silvia has used in other situations as well. This experience counts as both a bridge and a barrier, which has been difficult.

Earlier this semester, a company called LevelUp offered to give away free lunch from Aguacate Verde to people who downloaded an application on their smartphones at the restaurant. Silvia explained that a lot of people came but not a lot of them came back, and that she’s not sure whether or not LevelUp will actually pay for the lunches because they “didn’t make that very clear.” This company offering a seemingly attractive deal and then not following up in a clear manner is problematic for Silvia as a business owner and has influenced her level of trust with other outside organizations.

In another case, a man who is friends with the owner of the skate shop next door came in and ordered some food. He is a chef at Northeastern and is also taking classes in food management so he talked with Silvia about a program he uses to keep track of everything he needs to keep track of for his business. He gave her the website for it and for the free demo, and he said he would be back in a week to see how she was doing with it and if she had decided it

was something that would be helpful for her. He said that if it was something she was looking for he would be glad to help her get started and answer questions. Silvia and I talked a little about it afterwards, and she mentioned that it is difficult to keep track of everything and she is interested in seeing what this program is all about. When I followed up with her, inquiring about it a month later, she mentioned that it had been too expensive of an option and that the man had only come back once to see her.

There are outside organizations helping as well, including Laughing at and Understanding Good Humor Seminars, an organization that an ex-coworker of Silvia's runs. In addition to her karaoke program every other Thursday night, Tamale Sundays, and other cultural events, L.A.U.G.H.S. and Aguacate Verde are partnering to run laughing workshops to teach about mental health and the importance of keeping fun in your life for balance. Though these workshops have not yet started as far as I know, Silvia is looking forward to this program.

Another outside force that has brought mixed results is Aguacate Verde's neighbors, both literally and in the sense of the surrounding community. Silvia tries to be a part of the community by using ingredients from local farmers if possible and by engaging with her customers. In the beginning of the semester Silvia mentioned how the community has been surprisingly welcoming and that people are generally happy to eat healthier food, despite a few still missing Tacos Lupita. As time wore on, those missing Tacos Lupita became more vocal.

Spurred by a break in to Aguacate Verde during which Silvia lost a considerable amount of money and confidence in her business' safety, we met in mid-December to strategize for the future. Eventually this conversation turned into a more focused interview with very specific purpose: to sort out the resistance that she has been facing from those who are against healthy

food. Oddly enough, there has been some overt resistance to her healthy food and that people have been coming in to tell her that she should cook unhealthy food. Specifically, a neighboring Real Estate place has asked for unhealthy food and the Laundromat across the street has been telling clients, mostly Latinos, to come in and tell Silvia that she is not doing a good job because her food is too healthy and not authentic enough.

Silvia is concerned because she knows about the health risks of eating unhealthily and fears that people in general might not know. She wants to educate them without coming off as preaching, and she wants people to know how to make food choices that will help lead to longer, healthier lives. We began to come up with a plan of action for this goal, including a letter to the editor of the Somerville journal and a nutrition survey. Using the idea of the survey as a way to get the word out and communicate her message behind why she makes healthy food would help her to further her efforts to educate. It would also help with publicity, as there would be completion prize of one free pupusa or drink from Aguacate Verde. The survey would be available both online and in the store and would be available in English and in Spanish. After taking the survey participants would also get the answers so that they could start learning immediately.

Our proposed questions ranged from “What is the role of fiber in digestion?” to “How much per week do you exercise?” Touching upon a few key nutritional points and aiming to glimpse into the lifestyles of those whom we would be interviewing, the end goal is to get a sense of where the knowledge level is with Silvia’s customers and potential customers so that she can then provide resources in Aguacate Verde to further knowledge. Silvia plans to get resources from the Cambridge Health Alliance and other local organizations as well.

What does it mean for Silvia, a Peruvian immigrant, that the Latino population in the area is one of the main populations that have a problem with her healthy menu? She said that most of her clients are white, which is fine, but she is very concerned about reaching out to the Latino population to educate on nutrition because she feels that a lot of Latinos are people who need this education the most.

Aside from resistance and the break in, a few other things have come up as barriers to Aguacate Verde's success. Once when I was supposed to have an interview with Silvia she was busy getting ready for Friday's event. There were no employees around and Silvia was running the place alone. She has been having a difficult time finding and sustaining a full staff and has run into issues with timeliness, attention to detail, and other common employer-employee subjects of contention.

Business itself is unpredictable, as is expected with a relatively new restaurant, but this makes it difficult for Silvia to predict how much to purchase at the Restaurant Depot per week, often causing her to have to make multiple trips. Buying too much is alright when the food can be saved for later, but since money is tight Silvia needs to ensure that she is spending just enough without exceeding her budget.

A final barrier is less severe but also more prevalent than most. I went to see Silvia to congratulate her on five months of business. She was excited to see me, but was also in the middle of a battle with the cable company on the phone. While on hold, she explained that she has been having a recurring problem and that she was frustrated with the wait time on the phone and about being bounced from person to person. On the phone, I could tell that language was a barrier and at one point when she was copying down a number she said to the man on the other

end, “Slow down, this is not my first language, you know.” While language is no longer a defining barrier for Silvia since her English is nearly perfect, it does stand as a challenge from time to time.

Having spent a lot of time at Aguacate Verde, with two of my formal interviews there, I feel that I have a relatively in-depth look at the bridges and barriers Silvia is juggling. I will continue to learn more as we strive to create and implement a successful survey and promotion within the next few months. Silvia has been approaching each barrier as something that she can overcome but knows that she needs to have a plan for doing so. Her future goals include publicity for certain, and revolve around nutrition education as well. Her devotion to healthy eating remains, unwavering in the face of resistance.

Chapter Two: Caprese Pizzeria & Grill

Located in Magoun Square, tucked away down Medford Street past CVS and across from a hair place, Chinese restaurant, and Petisco, you will find Caprese Pizzeria & Grill. Every time I have come by this area remotely near rush hour or another busy time of day, there is traffic outside on Medford Street that backs up from the lights in Magoun Square to just about where Caprese is located on Medford Street. I wondered how it works out being a delivery-based business on a street with little parking and potentially a lot of traffic, and I got to find out when talking with owner Thanas Gjerazi.

My first impressions of Caprese were positive: the cheerful vibe inside, the large chalk board displaying the menu in all different colors and the Red Sox, Bruins and Patriots pride in various spots in the restaurant made me feel at home. The first time I went was truly almost an accident; I was walking back from failing to connect with any of the restaurants I had hoped to

talk with in East Somerville on a particularly cold day and chose to wander Magoun in search of somewhere else to plant the seeds of interview hope. I was also curious to look for Modelo, having heard a classmate raving about their Brazilian cheese bread and smoothies. On my way to scout it out I was captivated by the overwhelmingly large chalkboard menu, visible from the street. I was cold and it looked warm and inviting so I stopped in.

Coming inside, I focused on this chalkboard, now able to see that Caprese offers salads, subs, wraps, dinners, pasta, wings, and burritos, according to the neat headings. After leaving a note for the owner and warming up, I knew it was a place I wanted to return to. A few days later I went with a friend for dinner. We took the 89 to Magoun, where my friend said she had never been before because she had never been past Ball Square and Sound Bites on Broadway.

We took a long time to decide what to order, mostly because we were overwhelmed by the daunting chalk menu. The owner came over and gave us each a handheld paper menu, many of which I have seen distributed in dorms over the years. I got a chicken Caesar wrap and my friend got a broccoli and chicken calzone. The owner told us that it would be about ten or fifteen minutes until our food was ready and asked us if we would like to go walk around the neighborhood for a bit. We thanked him but decided to stick around and wait for our food.

While we were waiting we chatted with the owner a little about the restaurant. I asked him about the note I had left him a few days earlier and he grabbed it from beside him on the counter to show me and make sure I was the same person who wrote it. He said I could come in next Monday afternoon for an interview.

As we were waiting, we got to observe a lot about the restaurant. It's a small room that constitutes the sitting, ordering, and general customer-accessible area of the establishment.

Some sort of news and then “Inside Edition” was playing on the TV in the upper left corner of the wall facing into where customers can sit and wait or eat, followed by “Last Man Standing.” The whole time we were there, they appeared to be very busy on the phone taking orders. I saw on a sign that they do free delivery but that orders must be ten dollars or more. A man yelled in the door to the owner to order his food, and came back later to pick it up. Two men about my age, one a bit older and with his two dogs tied up to a pole outside, came in and both waited for their food while texting and watching TV. The man without the dogs stayed and ate his food alone in the restaurant. Overwhelmingly, phone orders dominated. At one point even the owner went out on a delivery run.

A biker outside stopped to read the menu that’s taped to the window to attract the eyes of passerby, while the traditional “OPEN” neon sign shone bright in the darkening streetscape, as it was nearly 7:30pm. We took note of the interior of the restaurant, and discussed that it was relatively small, with three small square tables. Brick walls on one side nicely contrast the yellow painted wall on the other. There is a big brown box for bottle recycling next to the refrigerator for drinks, and there is a baseball ornamenting the fan light on the surprisingly high wood ceiling. Of the Red Sox, Bruins, and Patriots stickers on the counter where you order, some are authentic and others spell out well wishes for the teams with everyday foam letters that were purchased at a craft store or somewhere else.

There is a cross hanging on the wall and a teddy bear decked out in Christmas spirit hanging from the chalk menu. Phonebooks decorate the windowsill, and ceramic salt shakers that look like waiters are on each table, offering salt while holding wine and peppers. They look festive and sit next to the candle and napkin dispenser on each table. Overall, the inside of the restaurant is very clean and looks either new or newly redone.

Behind the counter where you order, there is a counter that serves as a wall between the serving area and the cooking area. A Purell™ dispenser is fastened to the side of it, and to the side on the wall is a bulletin board with a map of Somerville on it and a bunch of dollars hanging as well. During my interview a few days later I learned that these dollars were well-wishes from customers during the beginning months of business.

Our food came, packaged and ready as if we were going to take it elsewhere to eat. The bag that my wrap came in had a yellow submarine on it and said something about a “Delicious Sub!” inside. And it was; my chicken Caesar wrap was incredibly fresh and the chicken was still warm, which made for a delicious mix of chicken, lettuce and tortilla. There was not too much salad dressing; just enough for flavor but not enough to make the wrap soggy. My friend’s chicken broccoli calzone was huge, and also tasted great. Both dishes were filling as well, I was full after half the wrap and conveniently was able to save the rest for later due to their ready-to-go packaging.

On my way out I noticed a Fodler sticker on the window of the door, encouraging customers to order online. Upon further investigation, I found that Caprese also has a very professional looking website. The website highlights their takeout options and even has “order online” capabilities. It seems that they do a lot of their business this way. Between their Monday-night Beat-The-Clock deals; where the price of any large cheese ordered between 5pm and 9pm is determined by the time that one calls in to order; and their tactic of leaving menus in Tufts dorms, Caprese targets those who seek inexpensive and satisfying pizzas.

On Monday, November 28th I got to interview the owner, learning a lot that I would have liked to quote him on, but unfortunately this interview did not record and we were unable to

recreate it for a re-recording. That day I went to Caprese around 2pm and talked to one of the men working there who told me that Thanas would be in around 4 or 4:30. I got a slice of pizza for lunch, which was enormous and very good and sat doing work for a while. I then went to other places in East Somerville and came back around 4:30. The man who I spoke with before told me that Thanas would be here in two minutes which proved to be exactly accurate. Thanas came in and told me he would be ready for our interview in a few minutes.

We shortly began the interview and Thanas was a wonderful narrator, giving a lot of information and insight on his restaurant, experiences and advertising. He explained that he was born in Fier, Albania and grew up there. He moved to Greece in order work in the restaurant business and support his family, and fell in love with working in this industry. He has years of experience in restaurants and it has always been his dream to have his own place to run. He moved to the United States about twelve years ago and knew that he wanted to work in restaurants.

While living in Connecticut he began actively looking for a place to own a restaurant in the Somerville area. One immediate barrier for him was his separation from the location; he expressed that it was difficult to research the area and find places for sale living so far away. He was drawn to Magoun as a changing part of Somerville and even more due to the schools and exciting atmosphere in the area. He was especially drawn to Somerville because of Tufts, he said. Once he found this place, he bought it from two Bulgarian brothers who had been running it for only a few months. Thanas mentioned that at the time he was looking for places in Somerville, his wife was pregnant with their first child and it was a very turbulent time for him personally and business-wise, trying to juggle all of the parts of the process.

Thanas signed papers on Caprese on May 15th of last year and has been in this location for about one and a half years. Shortly after he signed the papers, his son was born, and soon after he and his family moved to the Somerville area. They had a tough time finding an apartment or house to live in but seem to be all set now.

Before working in Somerville, Thanas had other experience in restaurants in the US, but we did not discuss that in much detail. I asked him about his experience starting up the restaurant, and he said that it was not particularly difficult. He knew a lot about restaurants and knew that the American system would be different than what he was used to in Greece, but he actually found it to be much simpler and more straightforward than systems he had previously dealt with. He was already serve safe certified which he said was helpful because they look for that, and meeting with the city board and all of the other necessary people was not an issue. He was surprised at how helpful everyone was and feels positively towards Somerville as a supportive part of the restaurant startup. All of this previous experience was a clear bridge to Thanas' startup success.

Though location is probably not Caprese's strongest bridge, with Magoun as one of the least busy squares of Somerville popularity-wise, neighbors are a bridge in Thanas' eyes. The local CVS is a business booster, as it brings in people walking by and gets people who live in the area coming in for a slice of pizza as they are also on their way out to grab something at CVS. This foot traffic is a nice addition to the overwhelming majority of Thanas' business which comes from delivery. Usually at any given time he has two employees out doing deliveries, and the other day when I came in even he helped out delivering.

Advertising is another aspect of the business that has been going well and serving as a bridge. Thanas has worked with the post office on fliers and has tried other methods as well, yet internet advertising has been his strongest support. Currently he has Caprese up on four different advertising sites, including GrubHub, foodler, Eat 24 Hours, and Yelp. He wants to create a strong online presence while continuing to keep his advertising campaign manageable for himself as a small business owner with a family. Overall, he really stressed that advertising is key to owning any business and that without it, a business is nothing.

The only thing Thanas values more than advertising, it seems, is customer service and satisfaction. He strives to make sure that his customers are happy and informed. During the time I have spent in Caprese so far I have noticed that Thanas appears to have many friendships with local residents who come in and chat with him as they order food. He knew a lot of people coming in by name, showing that he really cares about customers and wants to get to know people. He told me that his customers were a huge source of support in the beginning stages of the restaurant. The dollar bills and other money tacked up behind the cash register came from hopeful and well-wishing people coming in, saying things like, "Congratulations, here's five dollars for a good start!" He had each person sign the bill they gave and keeps them pinned up both for good luck and as a reminder of the community's support.

Running Caprese comes with its challenges as well, including the struggle to keep the prices affordable in times of economic decline. Thanas stressed his goals of being a customer-friendly establishment and recounted that he has been making an effort to keep his prices low despite some difficulties in the past months and since he opened.

Parking was something that I assumed would be an issue for Thanas, running a delivery service out of a small section of a strip mall on a crowded street. He articulated that parking has been getting better recently, and that the meters have been helpful in decreasing the parking problems of the past. Thanas is familiar with Matthew Diaz, Somerville's traffic supervisor, and did not express much concern over parking as an issue for his restaurant. How different would his sentiments be if he owned a sit-down restaurant, or if he did not rely on deliveries for most of his business?

Like Silvia, Thanas deals with the perks, quirks, and barriers created through the experience of taking ownership of someone else's restaurant and trying to make it his own. Before the interview, he had mentioned that there were a lot of different owners before him, in a relatively short span of time. I asked him to tell me a bit more, and he gave me a synopsis of the history of the location. Within the past ten years Caprese has passed through at least four different owners, to his knowledge. Most recently was duo of Bulgarian brothers who were only in the location for five or six months before they sold it to Thanas.

When Thanas took ownership he changed the menu a bit to suit his own style. He kept the burritos on the menu as an option but limited the variety of burritos because he and his employees are not experts in making them. Caprese currently has four varieties, but he is the first to admit they are not exceptionally authentic. Additionally, Thanas changed the way they cook their pizzas from the Italian way to the more Greek style. When the restaurant changed over from its previous ownership, Thanas did not change the name, though he did change the image and some of the food selection. Did this help or hurt business? Taking over a restaurant can be a bridge when what was there before was popular and the community is willing to take a chance with the replacement, yet at the same time it is risky due to comparisons between old and

new. As Thanas continues to settle in, he also must continue to work at creating a distinct reputation for his Caprese if he sees the need to do so.

Thanus' goal is to provide quality service and also to set himself apart from other pizza places in small ways, trying to make his business unique, friendly, and comfortable. When asked about his goals for the future, his reply was simple: "making this place better and better" (Gjerazi 11/28/11). From his large chalk menu to his free delivery, he aims to attract as many people as he can and form a good relationship with the community.

Chapter Three: Rudy's Café

Next in line for interviewing came the closest, most well-known, and only non-immigrant owned restaurant I worked with, Rudy's. I knew about it because I had been there before as a customer twice. Once with my mother, grandmother and cousin; once with my friends to celebrate a birthday; and both times captivated by the ambiance, I had been looking for a reason to go back.

Rudy's Café is on the corner of Holland Street and Newbury Street in Teele Square, specifically at 248 Holland Street. It is across the street, on the Newbury Street side, from the fire station and is next to a hair salon and some other small shops. It is one of the biggest and most prominent buildings located in Teele Square. On outside, the building is tan and relatively simple-looking, with red writing depicting the restaurant's name in two places so that people coming from multiple angles can see it and a colorful mural of a desert scene on the Newbury Street side of the building, conveying the "Tex-Mex" feel of the business. There is a bus stop for the 87 and 88 nearby, but otherwise Rudy's is not particularly close to any public transportation.

It is about a five minute walk straight down Holland Street to get to Davis Square, where more transportation opportunities are available.

On the outside of the restaurant near the entrance, which is closer to the neighboring businesses than it is to the corner and is in a small overhang area, the menu is posted for passerby to examine and potential customers to look at. I would guess that in addition to convenience and publicity factors, this is to show people that the prices are reasonable, because as we spoke, the owner, Rob Halpin, mentioned a desire to appeal to the younger college crowd looking for a good deal on a meal.

Stepping inside, one immediately notices the calm and welcoming vibe. Whether it is the comfortable waiting chairs and couches for busy nights, the sunny ambiance during the day with the light shining through the large windows, the dim but comfortable evening lighting, or the friendly staff, a customer is likely to feel at home upon entry. To the right is the bar, with eight to ten stools and spillover seating with the couch space, decorated with a dazzling display of bottles. The wall has festive decorations, from lizards to suns to cacti, setting a casual tone. Moving into the seating area, one is immediately struck by the contrast between the tan interior and the bright red, yellow, green and blue wooden chairs at many of the tables. There are also cozy, yet roomy, blue and yellow booths lining the left side of the dining area. In the very corner, there is a fireplace with cacti living on top of it.

As one steps into the main eating area, they can see that there is even a separated room in the back with red walls and more intense decorations. This area, though still part of the normal dining area, stands out due to its wall color and set-off feel. Just outside of this “room,” in the main dining room, there is a specials board with the week’s offerings chalked up in bright colors.

The balance between the colorful and playful decoration and the calm feeling that I felt walking into Rudy's makes me see it as a casual gathering place for friends and family to dine.

In late November I left a note for Rob Halpin, asking for the chance to interview him. One of the hostesses let me know that he would be in on Friday afternoon, so I notified Rob that I planned to drop by mid-afternoon to talk to him in person about the potential interview. When I walked in on Friday, the restaurant was empty except for a few guys at the bar and behind the counter. I asked if I could talk to the owner and one of the men came out from the bar, saying that he was the owner and had gotten my note. He asked a bit more about the project then said that he would definitely be able to do an interview. We agreed to meet on Monday, December 5th at 3pm.

At this interview, I learned not only information about Rudy's and about owning a restaurant, but also discovered that Rob and I lived in the same hallway of the same dorm at Tufts. Getting to discuss the secret pathways of the dorm and other related memories was an unexpected addition to our planned interview. Moving quickly to the main parts of the interview, I also learned about the history and operation of Rudy's.

Owner Rob Halpin, born in Stafford Springs, Connecticut and raised in Sommers, Connecticut, grew up enjoying cooking. He began working at Rudy's Café as a senior at Tufts as a part-time job and has been working there ever since, for almost twenty-four years. He and his wife, who is a fellow Tufts graduate, reside in Natick, MA, about a half hour from Somerville. The fact that the owner has worked his way up from being on kitchen staff means that he understands where the restaurant has been, where it is now and where it hopes to go. This type of continuity can surely be a bridge towards current and future success.

During our interview, Rob explained that the previous owner and owner of the building that Rudy's is located in, John Fallon, started this location in 1982 not expecting it to become his main focus and most profitable restaurant. Interestingly, it has done very well and still runs strong today. Though he admits that Teele Square is not well-known, has "come a long way" from where it used to be, which, as Rob interpreted it, was "pretty rough" with "a lot of police cars and fights and stuff." He mentioned that with the arrival of the Red Line to Davis in the eighties he noticed a difference in the clientele and in the people who frequented the area of Teele Square. He even mentioned that it has become more gentrified since that happened but that he does not agree with "some people's" sentiment that that means it has lost its character.

Rob has an extremely positive opinion of Teele Square and is proud to talk about the many sorts of businesses in the square, especially in terms of multi-cultural, ethnic and national representation. He refers to Teele as "The United Nations of Teele Square," and described the different businesses and nationalities or ethnicities of the people who own them. He stressed that there is a lot going on in Teele Square yet many people, even those who live nearby and including Tufts students, do not recognize or seem to know about it. He lamented that the Tufts Joey does not make a stop in Teele through it literally drives right through, and asked that I work on that if possible. This barrier limits his business to those who are coming to Teele Square or are passing through and prevents him from getting a lot of potential foot traffic from those riding the Joey.

Rob noted that Rudy's has been in Teele nearing thirty years and is the "anchor." This strong sense of place is a bridge that helps him know that he has a very stable business going. Less concerned about staying alive as a restaurant, he is able to focus on the day-to-day details such as the specials and other things and to focus on the future. It was less of a process to set up

an interview with him, indicative of his busy, yet not impossibly overworked, schedule. He also has a lot of people working for him and even has others to help him with the managing aspect. This is a huge difference compared to Silvia, who is basically running Aguacate Verde alone with very minimal staff helping out; or Jessica and her husband needing to juggle the behind the scenes restaurant and administrative work while also doing everything that an employee would.

It was interesting to hear Rob talk specifically about gentrification and to even mention that he noticed such a change happening as the Red Line came into Davis Square. As someone who lives outside of the community, did he not feel as connected? Has it been a positive thing for business and therefore not an issue? He talked a lot about the area having crime and a lot of “dive bars” in the past, does this mean that the driving out of the previous clientele, who may not have been as likely to spend money on dinner at Rudy’s or who may not have been able to afford it, actually improved business? I wonder about the business dynamic at that time and where the majority of customers were coming from. With gentrification as a potential bridge towards economic success, Rudy’s business continues.

Advertising is a barrier for Rudy’s, but mostly because it is largely ignored as an opportunity. Rob noted that they do not do much, or barely any, publicity. They have “never really felt the need to” in the recent past at least; years back the owner knew someone who drew for the Editorial Fever and the restaurant was featured in that comic publication. Now, Rob has a website that was recently dubbed useless by the Boston Globe as they were naming his bar one of the top five in the area, and he mentioned that he wants to start thinking about both improving his current advertising and doing more, especially given the current economic trends that are not looking good.

Rob does do advertising on something called the “Getaway Boutique,” a kiosk business that basically sells deals to people that they can give as gifts. Rudy’s has a dinner for two with drinks available for purchase, but it is just starting up in the Massachusetts area so he did not have a very comprehensive take on how progress is going with this endeavor.

I was surprised to hear that Rudy’s does not do much advertising. I think it is important to note that most of Rudy’s advertising is on the internet and also in the “Getaway Boutiques” program, clearly targeting a more middle-class audience in my opinion. He does not appear to be specifically targeting anyone who is looking for authentic Mexican food and also seems to want to be a comfortable place for people not wanting to stray from “American” food, offering things like burgers on his menu.

We talked about his client base and he said, “It’s a pretty diverse crowd,” including people from the local area, from the city and from the suburbs. There are some Tufts students, but not many, and also some Tufts faculty. There is a mix of families, young professionals, and even an older crowd. All of Rob’s customers come in as regular patrons, rarely ever for an event. He mentioned that closing the restaurant for an event is rarely more profitable than a night of business.

About the food, Rob mentioned that he “certainly wouldn’t call it authentic Mexican.” Then again, the restaurant is a Tex-Mex one, so the Americanization is part of the idea. He mentioned assisting those with restricted diets or food allergies and also talked about their goals to keep the menu up to date based upon what the customers want. The specials come from the restaurant staff and the food offered is “driven by what people want to get; what people are asking for.”

In terms of the food not being authentic, it's interesting to compare this sort of "inauthentic" to Silvia's "inauthentic," or at least nontraditional, approach to her food. She is altering Mexican food to make it healthier and Rob is altering Mexican food to Americanize it. The two have had different responses and although it's hard to tell yet with Silvia, it seems that the "Americanization" route has been wildly productive for Rudy's. Does making food healthy sort of "Americanize" it too, in a way, because of the population of people looking to eat healthily? Though the more overarching mentality and practice in the United States currently does not revolve around a healthy diet so that seems unsupported as a theory. How do cultural and societal norms fit in here with the two different styles of altering Mexican food?

Does Rudy's need to serve these traditionally American foods in order to succeed? If so, what are the implications of this and what does it mean for businesses trying to cater to those who want authentic food? I think it has a lot to do with advertising and audiences that a restaurant is trying to attract. Is Rudy's targeting a specific audience in its advertising strategy that is yet to be fully developed? How is it different from Silvia's advertising strategy and student focus? What about Taco Loco and Tapatío? Tapatío seems to be catering towards Spanish-speaking individuals seeking traditional food, while Taco Loco is catering towards "Americans" more than its counterpart. At Caprese, Thanos advertises heavily in order to get a lot of calls for deliveries. How does location play into this?

The biggest issue concerning Rudy's right now, Rob feels, is parking. Parking is difficult for customers because it barely exists and because of the Somerville Police's propensity for giving out tickets that often double a customer's dinner costs and deter them from coming back. Also, some who cannot find parking choose to eat elsewhere. Parking is even an issue for

employees, who now must get business parking permits rather than parking for free as Rob used to.

Despite this clear issue of contention, relations with the city of Somerville did not seem to cause Rob trouble. Most of what he needs to do with the city revolves around renewing licenses and other standard procedures. He mentioned that every now and then something arose where he felt like he had to “jump through hoops,” but that he doubted it was “any worse than anywhere else.”

A definite bridge is the neighborhood relationship with the other restaurant owners in Teele. The other night Rudy’s ran out of ice but they felt totally comfortable asking P.J. Ryan’s for some of theirs. This sort of helping one another out is common among Teele restaurant and business owners and Rob seemed to know most of the owners personally. A supportive community of other owners nearby is a social bridge that truly appears to make a difference in Teele.

Overall, Rudy’s seemed to have far more functional bridges than barriers. While parking is an issue, Rob knows that he can begin to spend more time with advertising to work on attracting new crowds, maybe even ones who do not rely on cars, including the Tufts population and nearby neighborhoods. It will be interesting to see how this stable Teele restaurant builds its client base even further.

Chapter Four: Taquería Tapatío and Taco Loco

Approaching Taquería Tapatío, I originally did not notice the plain green sign, raised above street level in a way that makes it difficult if not impossible to read for passerby on the same side of the street as the restaurant. I think that it would probably be easy to pass by unless

someone was looking for it. Located at 82A Broadway, it is partway between Franklin Street and Hathorn Street but is closer to Franklin Street. Neighboring stores include smaller stores on either side and a liquor store closer to Hathorn, with Amigos Market not far away on the corner of Franklin and Broadway.

Walking into Tapatío, the pictures of food on the wall immediately draw one's eye. Contrasted against the bright yet comforting yellow wall paint, these hanging framed photos label common types of Mexican food, allowing the consumer to get a preview of what they are about to taste. The tables on either side as one walks towards the counter to order are meant for those who would like to stay for a bit, socializing with friends or family or catching up on the latest Spanish news or show playing on the television hanging from the ceiling above one of the drink refrigerators by the cash register.

The menu, hanging in parts above the food that is waiting to be ordered, is a mix of English and Spanish and the ordering process is friendly to speakers of both languages. One can see all of the food options sitting behind the glass panel, freshly made and ready to be used to create each dish on the spot. There are even treats, like ice cream, if one travels a few feet further down the deep and narrow restaurant to the dessert portion of the counter. The wait is usually not an issue, but the restaurant does tend to get crowded around the lunch time rush.

The atmosphere is welcoming and the employees are friendly. On each table there is hot sauce, Italian dressing, salt, and ketchup next to the napkins, which I found to be an interesting assortment of condiments. As I sat eating my food, I observed the other people in the restaurant to see who was coming in and out. There was a family, a mother and son, eating near the door and a group of three men who appeared to be on their lunch break talking and laughing at

another table. A bunch of young girls in their school uniforms came, accompanied by an adult, maybe a teacher. They each got something small and walked back outside. Later, two different groups of friends came in to order food, and as I was leaving the line was very long during the late-lunch rush. The restaurant is open for all three meals of the day and mainly serves Latino clients.

Taco Loco's atmosphere is slightly more cosmopolitan and less family-centric, with counters along the sides of the restaurant for those who wish to sit while waiting for their order or grab a spot to eat quickly and then go on their way. The menu is more in English than Spanish and one could say the same about the television playing on the left side of the establishment. There is a bright mural on the right wall, other artwork on the left and a bright cactus in the window with larger plants on either side of the door. It is a much smaller space, which does not prove to be an issue because of the fast service.

Upon one visit, from my corner window seat at the counter that lines the perimeter of the front of the restaurant, sitting under the blinking "OPEN" sign, I had a clear view of Broadway Brake Co. and could see the busy traffic on the raised highway towards Sullivan Square. Also across the way was a residential area on the side of Broadway Brake closer to the rest of the East Somerville businesses. At 44 Broadway, Taco Loco is significantly further down the street towards Sullivan than Tapatio is, but the two restaurants are within a five minute walk of one another.

I had the opportunity to interview Jessica Morales, wife of Benjamin Morales with whom she runs the two restaurants. We worked for a while to set up the interview, during which time I was able to visit both restaurants many times and observe the atmosphere thoroughly. When I

got to Tapatío on the day of the interview, Jessica was sitting at a table ready for the interview. Since it was loud upstairs, we moved downstairs to the office to be able to record in a quieter spot.

Jessica Morales was born in the United States, grew up in El Salvador and eventually returned to the United States, where she lives now with her husband and two-year-old son. She and her husband decided to start a Latino restaurant over sixteen years ago when they saw a need for one in the community. Since then, the pair has been working, along with other family members, to maintain and improve the restaurants they own. Currently, Jessica is taking classes part time at Bunker Hill Community College and hopes to someday be a child psychologist.

At the beginning of the interview, Jessica told me a little about each restaurant and described some of the similarities and differences between the two locations. As discussed before, Tapatío is much more catering towards Latinos and towards people who are looking to have a more authentic, sit down meal. Taco Loco caters towards those who are looking for take-out and has many more “American” customers. She mentioned that the two restaurants are like the “pioneros,” or pioneers, of the Latino restaurants in East Somerville.

When she and Benjamin and his brothers came to the United States, they got jobs in restaurants and some in construction as well. They realized that there were no "restaurantes hispanos," or Latino restaurants, in the area and decided to do something to change that so that people could eat what they used to eat in their countries before coming to the US. They wanted to do this for people who missed their countries and their food.

As we talked more, she explained differences between the two restaurants. Taco Loco is more of a takeout place but that it is very successful; it won "Best of Somerville" the past four

years in a row. It is closer to Sullivan Square and has a much larger client base of white people, and many fewer Salvadorians, the opposite of Tapatío. The Morales' also own the Amigos supermarket, and Jessica explained that the string of restaurants is a "corporation." Tapatío has a much more "authentic Mexican" feel, Jessica explained, and is largely meant for families.

While there are differences between Taco Loco and Taquería Tapatío, food is not one of them. Jessica said that they serve basically the same exact food in the two locations. So how do the two sites get such different reputations? The difference that different presentations and restaurant images makes is interesting because it shows how much advertising and presentation can influence whether or not food seems "traditional" or "authentic." If we asked a customer, they would probably say that the food at Tapatío is more authentic and traditional, but is that because of its location more in the heart of East Somerville, its client base, its setup, or other factors? Obviously none of these factors exists in a vacuum, and the décor of each restaurant plays into the image that Jessica and Benjamin are trying to send as well. How does this apply with Rudy's, Aguacate Verde and Caprese?

A large bridge for the Morales' is that they have multiple locations, or this "corporation" working to attract customers and make administrative work collaborative. Business itself, Jessica noted, is very time consuming and she, her husband and her brother-in-law share the workload. Working with her family members, she tries to balance home life and work life and knows that she has a strong support system.

The family connection, history, and status as the oldest Latino restaurants in the area are massive bridges to success. At the same time, the location of East Somerville is a barrier and a bridge all on its own. It's not particularly accessible from West Somerville, but is that where

most clients are coming from? That didn't seem to be the case. This area of the street has very little parking, as does most of East Somerville's part of Broadway. I wondered why Jessica was not mentioning parking to be an issue when I asked her, yet as I wondered I also noted that most of the people whom I saw coming in and out of the restaurant were on foot, even into the colder months. It's possible that parking is less of an issue because the restaurant is located where most of the clients who are coming on a regular basis can walk in, either from work or home. The location and clientele really do affect which barriers matter and which bridges are useful.

The thing that Jessica did mention as the most difficult was making sure to be a fair boss to all of her employees, creating an atmosphere where her employees felt comfortable and where things got done right as well. She stressed the importance of needing to please the customers and the employees as something crucial to being a restaurant owner. Making sure that employees feel like work is "their second home" and treat their coworkers as a part of their family is one of Jessica's goals, and she understands that in order to do that she must be a respectful boss. She "is not the owner of the people," but is in charge of making sure that her employees feel appreciated when they deserve it and that when she needs to make a correction in their behavior, she does so in a productive, not aggressive, way. The employees should be working because they love it, not simply working for their next check. She wants her employees to enjoy what they do and do it well, which seems to be working because employees tell her that they won't leave their job until they are "taken out by a crane or kicked out." This employee camaraderie, though arduous to create and maintain, is a huge bridge.

On the other side of the counter, the supportive customers, pushing her along when she has had a bad day or when she is about to give up, are what keeps her going. When Tapatío burned down four years ago and it was looking tough and costly to rebuild, the customers who

commented on how much they missed it were the incentive to keep working. And when Tapatío wasn't making any profit and they thought to close it, customers coming in to compliment the food or the service reminded her and her husband why they were doing what they were doing.

Seeing the ways in which she and her family keep themselves motivated, largely stemming from customer support, was inspirational and led me to think more about how pivotal of a role customers can actually play in the success of a restaurant. They are quite possibly the largest bridge that someone can have, which is why so many owners focus so much on customer service. The difference between customer support here and the customer resistance that I talked with Silvia about yesterday was huge; yet in both cases customer support does still play a role. How influential is it? What is it that customers do for a restaurant? Publicity is definitely a part of it, and praise can be another. Jessica mentioned that honest feedback is another area where customers need to be consulted and entrusted.

From our class discussion, I predicted that the Foodie Crawl was going to be a barrier for the restaurants. Yet Jessica mentioned that she views it as an investment to attract new customers and that although they did lose a lot that night, they have seen at least ten people return since the food crawl and feel that it is a step towards expanding business even more. At the food crawl she made an effort to talk with each person and ask them whether they had come before and invite them to come back. Jessica's choice to add a personal touch to the food crawl by greeting each person and telling them to come back seems to have been productive, given that she had returners. Would they have come back anyway? Why did they choose to come back to the Morales' restaurants in particular?

While the Foodie Crawl was one potential source of advertising, it was not the Morales' usual method. Mainly they advertise on the radio, Radio Luz, a religious Spanish station, and Radio Atlántica. This venue really helped spread the word when Tapatío reopened two years ago after having been closed for two years, and helps a lot with publicity in general. Since her husband is a relatively well-known preacher, the Radio Luz connection is also fairly strong. She talked about having been in public places, like hospitals, where people know of Taco Loco, and mentioned that it is the more famous of the two restaurants. Other publicity opportunities that Tapatío and Taco Loco use are "Yelp!" and the word-of-mouth praise of customers, which Jessica mentioned has gained them awards for Taco Loco as the best taquería in Somerville for four years in a row.

When I asked her to give a piece of advice to a new restaurant owner, Jessica said that people always start with a lot of optimism and goals and need to know that they will hit tough spots- "todo el mundo de los negocios no es color de rosa," meaning that not everything in business is rose-colored. She would urge a new business owner not to give up, but instead to be persistent and evaluate things that are not going well to always ensure improvement. She noted that they are constantly evaluating themselves and their work in an effort to be the best they can be. Talking to customers and finding out what the food is like is important, and making corrections to employees civil and fair is equally important when those corrections are necessary. Above all, she said, customer service is the most important thing to pay attention to.

Finally, I asked Jessica about her goals for the future of the two restaurants and she wants to continue improving quality of service and food. She wants to find ways to get better and expand more, if God allows, she said. She wants to start new things without losing the quality of the old ones and to make sure that her customers are satisfied.

It seems that the bridges and barriers with these two restaurants are varied, from physical disasters to balancing acts to connections around the community; the Morales are building bridges where they do not have them, using existing ones, and taking the barriers one at a time.

Conclusion:

While the specific situations surrounding the bridges and barriers these restaurants faced varied, the themes throughout show some serious similarities; from parking to customer service, the owners who I spoke with are largely going through similar struggles, all finding solutions that work for them. Spending the semester thinking about what goes into making a restaurant succeed was interesting, as the positive and negative factors varied from place to place. One strategy that worked for one restaurant hurt another, and some places really had to alter their approaches to publicity and other things depending on location, customer base, or other factors.

The main message applicable to all of them is that success lies in using the bridges at one's disposal to advantage the business and using the barriers to build bridges in some way. As Jessica Morales stressed, starting a restaurant is not the most important part of owning one. Maintaining the restaurant while working to improve it is really where the hard work lies. When a restaurant owner can continually analyze and rethink strategies for success, they will be more ready to use barriers that confront them as ways to grow, rather than let those barriers deter them from reaching their goals. Bridges and barriers exist everywhere in the restaurant world, and there are definite bridges and barriers that come with each type of restaurant and with immigrant-owned ones in particular. The most important lesson I learned from the owners this semester was the importance of utilizing one's bridges to overcome one's barriers, and I believe this is applicable within and without immigrant owned Somerville restaurants.

Suggestions for future research:

Given that research on immigrant-owned restaurants is already scarce, I hope to see more done to document and research these establishments, both in Somerville and widespread. I believe that more needs to be done analyzing the structures of support for these restaurants. Whose responsibility is it to ensure that a restaurant continues once started? Where does the responsibility/accountability for the bridges and barriers lie? How are they being addressed? Could there be a “small business” department in City Hall, designed to provide support and offer troubleshooting help when needed? How can we make sure small businesses are on track and not struggling without being overbearing or creating impossible goals of support? In short, how are the bridges and barriers of immigrant-owned restaurants being confronted in a thoughtful way, and where does the responsibility to do so lie?

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