

# A MIDDLE TENNESSEE MELTING POT

Southern Craft Creamery flavors telegraph the local bounty. Her sweet cream base blossoms with Tupelo honey, harvested down the road in Calhoun County. The strawberries she brightens with balsamic vinegar are harvested at K&S Farms in Live Oak. The citrus that stars in her satsuma ginger sorbet is grown right in Jackson County at Cherokee Farms.

The quality of Lauren's products reflects the values she developed growing up on a farm. "Food has always been the thing that you share with people because it was really all you had to offer and doing it well just meant you cared that much more," she says. "I think that's where I get that gratification that I have when people enjoy the ice cream. It makes me feel like I did something for them." 🍷

*Ashley Melzer, a native of North Florida, is a journalist and filmmaker in Carrboro, NC.*

*PHOTOS, PAGE 14 and BELOW by Lauren O'Bryan.*



*Phita Hach inspires the Skillery Culture Kitchen*

*by Jennifer Justus*

THE SKILLERY CULTURE KITCHEN, a cooking class series taught by immigrants to the Nashville area, took shape in the tiny kitchen of eighty-seven-year-old Phila Hach.

Phila grew up in Nashville and learned to cook with her mother, a home demonstration agent. She later hosted the first televised Southern cooking show back in the 1950s. Prior to her television career, she explored the cuisine of other cultures while working as a flight attendant in the 1930s and '40s. On trips abroad, Phila would invite herself into the kitchens of the Hotel Georges V in Paris and The Savoy in London and ask to cook with the chefs. When I asked her how often they turned her down, she looked at me like I'd asked how often she puts sugar in her cornbread.

That's part of what makes Phila's home in Joelton, Tennessee, the perfect place for a visit with refugees from the embattled Middle Eastern nations of Iraq, Iran, and Kurdistan. Whether running her bed and breakfast or working with women from Nashville's International Center for Empowerment, Phila treats all of her guests with curiosity, openness, and acceptance.

Last summer, Phila invited three refugee women to her home to help explore ideas for a catering business or food truck. As they chopped dill and cucumbers for salads and simmered rice with currants and cardamom, Phila read to them from the cookbook she wrote after hosting a dinner for the United Nations delegation in 1976.

“All people everywhere are dependent on one another.”  
 “Everyone needs everyone else for freedom, life, love, and happiness.”

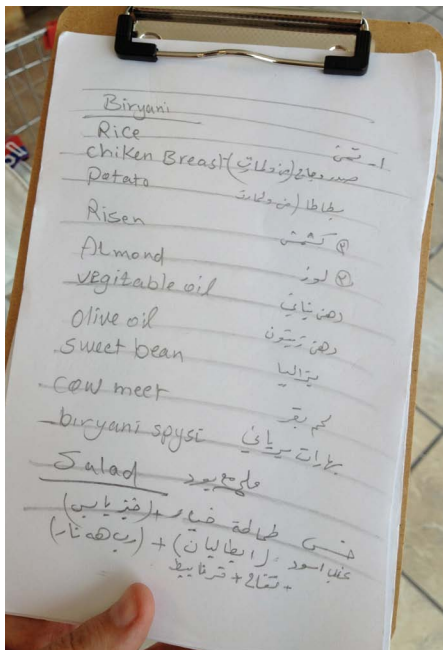
Gity Esfahani, a former member of the Iranian air force, arrived at Phila's home with the words “apron” and “strainer” written in pen on her hand like a to-do list. She wanted to remember the English words as she cooked with Phila, whom she knew to be an accomplished cookbook author. In less than an hour, the words had worn off, and the two women were cooking together as if they had done it for years. While chicken and rice simmered on the stove, Gity whirled fragrant saffron together with sugar in a coffee grinder. Phila, rapt, scribbled notes.

A FEW MONTHS AGO, another one of Phila's mentees, Kurdish immigrant Najat Al Zahawi, taught her first cooking class at the Skillery Culture Kitchen. It was also the inaugural class in the series. Nashville has the largest Kurdish population in the United States, so it made sense to begin the series with a lesson on Kurdish cuisine.

Najat taught biology in Iraqi Kurdistan before moving to the United States in 2007. Here, she works part-time in the nursery of the YMCA. An avid home cook, she demonstrated her biryani for the class—a composed rice dish with chicken, beef, toasted almonds, plump raisins, and a spice blend of cardamom, cinnamon, nutmeg, cumin, mace, clove, and fennel. She dressed a salad with pomegranate molasses and served it with flat bread baked at Sulav International Market in South Nashville.

Class attendees, all American, gathered around the kitchen island. Several of the students had taken classes through the Skillery, which offers instruction in a variety of topics from gardening and sewing to playing piano and home-brewing beer. But most of them were unfamiliar with Kurdish cuisine, and just a couple of attendees had tasted biryani before meeting Najat.

Only after talking about the rice and Najat's own experiences learning to cook did questions go deeper. One of the guests asked Najat about her religion. Najat had questions for her students, too, about marriage, divorce, and whether or not they have children. We talked about *Arab Idol*, the show much like *American Idol* that showcases the singing talent of the Middle East. A popular contestant, Parwas Hussein, comes from Najat's native country, she told us proudly.



As the class came to an end, Najat gestured to the platters of leftover food and explained that in her country, it's important to cook generously for guests. Students gladly went back for seconds and later filled paper plates to their edges with rice to cover and take home.

Regardless of the conversation topic, we connected easily over the plates of biryani, talking about the customs we celebrate differently and the many ways we're the same. 🍷

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*Tennessee-based Jennifer Justus, who writes about food and culture, is the author of the Food Lover's Guide to Nashville. The Skillery Culture Kitchen will host its next class in the fall, exploring the cuisine of Somalia.*

*PHOTO, PAGE 17 by John Partipilo of The Tennessean.*

*PHOTOS, PAGE 18 by Jennifer Justus*

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