

REPORT 14 Feb 18

HOW DO BERLINERS USE LOCAL CUISINE TO HELP REFUGEES?

With an influx of refugees to Germany, integration is an ongoing challenge. While a number of approaches are being trialled, cooking is a successful way to foster cultural exchange, enabling locals and refugees to share their own traditions, while forging meaningful relationships.

Location [Northern Europe / Western Europe](#)

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Barbara Woolsey is a Canadian journalist based in Berlin, regularly contributing to outlets such as Reuters, Thrillist and The Guardian on culture, travel, startups and more. Currently you can find her taking Greek classes.

Highlights & Data

- Barriers to integration for refugees in Germany include language and cultural nuances, while a shortage of affordable housing makes it difficult for them to become part of a community
- Food and cooking is being used as a practical tool to help migrants and refugees better integrate into society
- Über den Tellerrand and Lawrence facilitate integration through cooking while also bolstering the corporate social responsibility goals of local businesses
- By donating to or running these initiatives, businesses are demonstrating their commitment to supporting a community and are able to show that they care about helping people of all backgrounds live together amicably
- Around **600,000** asylum seekers were granted protection in Germany by the end of 2017 (*Institute for Employment Research, 2017*)
- Germany's housing shortage means the number of people living in the street in 2018 is projected to reach **1.2 million** (*BAG, Germany's federal group for homeless assistance, 2017*)

Scope

In Germany, forming meaningful relationships between locals and refugees is an ongoing challenge to integration. Many approaches are being experimented with, but food continues to be a successful bridge for cultural exchange – especially in the cosmopolitan capital of Berlin. Cooking, it seems, allows refugees to hold on to native traditions, while Berliners believe sampling new

cuisine helps give them an insight into the lives of people seeking refuge.

Über den Tellerrand and **Lawrence** are two of many concepts that facilitate integration through cooking, while bolstering the corporate social responsibility goals of local businesses at the same time. While the former is an ambitious approach to traditional cooking classes, the latter is a restaurant where Syrian delicacies are served up by a multicultural blend of Germans and migrant staff.

Both concepts are finding not just popularity with those seeking new culinary experiences, but also with a local community who view their social ventures as an investment.

Barriers to integration

In 2015, German Chancellor Angela Merkel opened the country's borders to migrants, many of whom fled war in the Middle East. The country's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees estimates that more than one million asylum applications were made throughout 2015 and 2016, with the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) saying that around 600,000 were granted protection in Germany by the end of 2017. [1][2]

Integration after the refugee crisis continues to be difficult, with many significant barriers appearing apparent. From language to cultural nuance, it's a challenge for many refugees to settle. German magazine *Der Spiegel* recently offered the example of Syrian refugee Dilshad Jaro, who wanted to meet locals but lacked the courage to start a conversation. His home in a refugee hostel saw him and his family interacting with other refugees almost exclusively, leaving them on the fringes of local German society. [3]

“ *Whatever the activity, there is always dinner involved somehow. We cook together and we eat together. I think this is a very important part of what makes us feel at home*

Noor Edres, project manager at Building Bridges

While the majority of new arrivals have now been transferred out of emergency refugee shelters and into communal housing, many would like to move into a place of their own. And it's this ambition to immerse themselves within a genuine German community that is being perceived as a crucial step towards integration.

However, the country faces serious structural challenges that are preventing many refugees from reaching this goal – in the short-term at least. Germany is currently suffering from a housing shortage, with the federal group for homeless assistance (BAG) projecting the number of those living on the street will reach 1.2 million in 2018. [4] A study from the Cologne Institute for Economic Research indicates that affordable housing is drying up in German cities – a tendency particularly pronounced in Berlin, where not enough apartments are being built to keep up with population growth. [5]



Food offers different cultures an effective of communicating on an equal level

Über den Tellerrand (2017) ©

Cooking up a solution

In light of such challenges, food has emerged as one of the simplest yet most effective ways to breach the cultural divide. The idea is that food is a universal language that can aid integration is a strong one, with many believing it has the power to transcend cultural divides while helping build relationships in the kitchen.

The open, culturally diverse environment of Berlin has inspired many initiatives that leverage this concept of food abetting integration. Alagami, a Syrian restaurant, and Konditorei Damascus, a Syrian bakery, are two refugee-run businesses that have been regarded as success stories by both local and international media. [6][7] Another concept, featured in the *New York Times* and NPR, has been Refugee Dinners, spearheaded by a Hungarian journalist who hosts small dinner parties with meals cooked by asylum seekers. [8][9]

Looking beyond the plate

One of Berlin's best-known initiatives is Über den Tellerrand (German term for "think outside the box" or in English, "beyond the plate"). It all started when students from the Free University of Berlin gathered pots and pans to cook with refugees. Cookbooks helped fundraise expansion into an ambitious non-profit. As Noor Edres, a German immigrant with Syrian roots, and project manager of spinoff initiative Building Bridges, says Über den Tellerrand is fuelled almost exclusively by food. "Everything we do is somehow related to food," Edres adds. [10]

Building Bridges emerged from group cooking classes, where refugee chefs taught local participants how to cook native cuisine. It pairs a Berlin local and an established migrant to cooperate in supporting a new refugee in building his or her life in Germany. "Whatever the activity, there is always dinner involved somehow," Edres continues. "We cook together and we eat together. I think this is a very important part of what makes us feel at home." [10]

We have learned a tremendous amount about Syrian culture... And through the restaurant, we have also been able to facilitate this learning for people who come in here to eat

Ilana Schmidt, project and event manager at FREEARTUS

Another offshoot from the Über den Tellerrand project is Kitchen on the Run, which travels across Germany with a mobile kitchen. “While in a city like Berlin there might be many initiatives to assist integration, in some small villages our Kitchen on the Run project might be the only initiative that helps create these connections,” Edres says. “These are towns where people might not be exposed to the realities of being a refugee. We want people to have these encounters. Cooking is a functional way to humanise and build empathy between them.” [10]



Brands supporting these initiatives show proper CSR and empathy with local communities

Über den Tellerrand (2017) ©

Making orders, not borders

Lawrence café and restaurant has also been leveraging food as a promoter of integration since opening at the end of 2017 with the motto “make orders, not borders”. Its team is comprised of German nationals, settled immigrants and recent refugees; reflecting the scale of demographic it is drawing upon, in the hope it can help forge meaningful relationships between foreigners and German natives. The head chef is Kurdish, the sous chef is Syrian, and the service team consists of Germans, Italians, Syrians, Iraqis, Kurds and Palestinians.

Ilana Schmidt, a project and event manager at FREEARTUS, the non-profit running the venue, says: “[The refugee crisis] is a recent development... everyone is still grappling with this question of how do you integrate these Middle Eastern people into Western worlds? How do we facilitate this integration?” Schmidt adds: “I know from myself and my co-workers alone that we have learned a tremendous amount about the Arabic world and Syrian culture ... And through the restaurant, we have also been able to facilitate this learning for people who come in here to eat.” [11] The venue has received a lot of positive customer feedback, particularly on its Facebook page. “So cool. I’m eating against racism and towards integration AND supporting jobs for migrants,” says one user.

“Unusual food,” says another user. “Kudos to the initiators!” [12]

Connecting refugees and businesses

The participation of German companies has been crucial in Über den Tellerrand and Lawrence's success. Über den Tellerrand boasts an impressive list of sponsors and supporters that have assisted its growth. [13] “Our Berlin office was built by students, who were encouraged by their universities to help us out,” says Endres. “We have a car from Volkswagen that they have allowed us to use. Bosch donated most of the electronic equipment. The mobile kitchen container that we use was donated, and the kitchen equipment inside was provided by IKEA. Both Nestlé and Deutsche Bank have also contributed significantly.” [10]

“A lot of the local businesses come here and have lunch with us every day,” says Schmidt of Lawrence. “There’s also the possibility of showing their support by holding their events here, in the form of business luncheons and exhibitions.” [11]

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Ilana Schmidt, project and event manager at FREEARTUS

Insights and opportunities

As Germany continues to integrate refugees, initiatives such as Über den Tellerrand and Lawrence illustrate how businesses can contribute towards good causes and demonstrate social responsibility to their customers. Food and cooking are an accessible means around which social-responsibility initiatives can be built. It’s a relatable concept that overcomes boundaries, as well as creating a practical approach for businesses to contribute in a variety of ways.

Through work with corporate sponsors, a variety of brands have demonstrated their commitment to supporting a community – no matter their origins – in a fashion that is tangible to customers and indicates a genuine interest in helping people of all backgrounds live together amicably. Lawrence has offered FREEARTUS as an effective way to engage the support of local German businesses. It allows these businesses to engage directly with the project of refugee integration, as an alternative to simply offering a financial donation.

A genuine desire exists within the Germany psyche to both connect with refugees and support projects that deliver a clear social benefit. As such, there is an equal benefit to be gained by businesses that get involved, by either contributing directly to social integration initiatives or even starting their own.

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