

Gardens of Memory, Markets of Hope: Migrant Food Infrastructures in Contemporary Japan

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Abstract

The relocation of food culture among migrants encounters inevitable barriers in accessing traditional ingredients due to disparities in climatic, agricultural, and cultural conditions between origin and host societies. This paper explores how Brazilian, Vietnamese, and Cambodian migrants in Japan have developed creative foodways that serve as expressions of cultural identity while facilitating integration into Japanese society. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and digital ethnography conducted in and with communities with arrival times going back to the 1980s, we demonstrate how migrants construct local food infrastructures that reflect their distinct migration histories and settlement patterns. While privileged visa status has enabled Brazilians to establish physical enclaves with elaborate agricultural networks, Southeast Asians' more dispersed settlement has spurred innovative digital food communities that transcend geographic separation. Beyond mere survival mechanisms, these food infrastructures—encompassing agriculture, distribution systems, commensality practices, and cross-cultural exchanges—create spaces where migrants negotiate complex identities and forge meaningful connections with Japanese neighbors. A thematic analysis reveals that migrant foodways represent the continuous strategic reorientation of migrants in response to their lived experiences of displacement, temporality, and belonging. Reflecting this analysis, we argue that food-centered activities create less coercive spaces of cultural encounter and friction with Japanese society that formal integration policies could not envision, helping to move beyond conventional notions of multiculturalism.

Keywords: migrant foodways, community formation, migration in Japan, Brazilian, Vietnamese, Cambodian

Between Two Tables: Migrant Foodways and Cultural Integration in Japan

Across Japan, in countless backyards, community gardens, and borrowed plots, a quiet revolution unfolds as migrants cultivate not just vegetables, but cultural continuity and community connections. These agricultural efforts represent the persistence of foodways—the cultural, social, and economic practices related to food production and consumption—that travel with migrants across borders, adapting and evolving in response to new environments. Ultimately, this may involve engaging in agriculture at different scales.

“If you go to some parts of Yokohama, you can tell which homes are Cambodian because they probably grow a lime tree or have planters full of chji (aromatic herbs) visible in their gardens.” (15 January, 2025; Cambodian community leader, 1.5 generation)

The relocation of migrants’ dietary patterns and food culture from one place to another is not merely a matter of individual intention and effort. Numerous structural barriers, including the unfamiliar climate, agricultural conventions, legal system, and customs of the new contexts can complicate the production, distribution and consumption of traditional foods in host countries (Berggreen-Clausen et al. 2021; Charles-Rodriguez et al. 2023). Migrant communities have historically adapted and figured out alternatives to maintain their foodways and food cultures through various innovative methods, such as substitution, self-subsistence initiatives, and reliance on international trading systems (Maller and Strengers 2013; Yilmaz-Hava et al. 2024). While some ethnic food items can be imported via migrant networks, various culturally significant vegetables, fruits and other plant-based foods that often cultivated, exchanged and consumed freshly within local communities, may be impractical to transport over long distances (Graham and Connell 2006; Seto-Suh 2023).

The lack of accommodation for migrant foodways by the host country is commonly normalized as a concern for the protection of local environment and the perceived desirability of migrant assimilation. This perspective is based on the assumption of migrants moving to the Global North from the Global South, where socio-ecological and cultural elements are considered as low-brow and significantly different from the host society (Taylor and Lovell 2015; Parasecoli 2014; Castles 2002). The separation between migrant food cultures and the host society’s socio-economic conditions is less likely to create favorable conditions for migrants to adopt the prevailing food items and culinary norms of the host. Instead, this division may contribute to disrupted eating practices and challenges in identity formation (Lillekroken et al. 2024; Kershen 2016). Yet, it remains unclear whether migrants from places with ethnic and geographical proximity to the host country, such as returnees and intra-regional groups, can readily acculturate to host society and how their adaptation process actually unfolds.

This study explores the role of community food activities of migrants in preserving home-country food culture and fostering cultural integration within Japanese communities, focusing on a comparison between migrants from Brazil and Southeast Asia (Vietnamese and Cambodian) migrants. Despite arriving in Japan around the same time in the 1980s, these groups experienced different residency regulations and migration patterns, leading to divergent trajectories in their approaches to agriculture, community formation, and local integration. By examining the tension between migrants' food activities as expressions of cultural continuity and identity and their desire for integration over forty years, we gain insight into the complex ways migrants negotiate belonging in their host society.

Temporal and Legal Aspects of Japan's Migrant Landscape

Japan presents a unique case study of a host society navigating the complexities of migration and localization of diverse populations and culinary traditions. Contrary to the perception of Japan as an ethnically and culturally homogeneous nation, demographic pressures have necessitated a gradual opening of its borders to accommodate an increasing number of foreign residents (Weiner 2009; Liu-Farrer 2020). While the native Japanese population declines, the current 2% foreign-born population is projected to rise, encompassing both high and low-skilled migrant workers with an aspiration of long-term settlement. Consequently, the representation and recognition of foreign foods within domestic foodscapes can significantly impact intercultural exchange and understanding between migrant and mainstream communities, potentially affecting the country's ability to attract and integrate future migrants.

This paper examines the local foodways of three migrant groups in Japan: Brazilians (including historically *Nikkei Brazilians* of Japanese descent), Vietnamese, and Cambodians. These groups represent different orientations and rationales in Japan's recruitment of foreign labor, based on the considerations of ethnic and geographical proximity. While the former group was anticipated (often carelessly) to inherit enough Japanese language and culture to help them readily assimilate within the perceived homeland, the latter originates from less developed neighboring countries in Southeast Asia, characterized by various natural and cultural affinities (Tsuda 1999; Liu-Farrer 2020). Brazilians were explicitly recruited by the government in the 1980s under a special long-term visa program based on blood lineage, a privilege unavailable for most other foreign nationals. This "privileged" legal status provided them with a flexibility to work and live anywhere, making them an ideal labor force for the unstable and non-regular jobs in Japanese factories (Higuchi 2010; Kajita et al. 2005). This influx persisted until the 2008 financial crisis, prompting the Japanese government to implement a scheme encouraging their return migration to Brazil. Consequently, those who decided to stay—211,907 as of 2024 (Immigration Services Agency)—

are those who committed to setting roots in Japan, often forming strong co-national bonds or enclaves. Residents with Brazilian heritage now stably constitute the fifth-largest foreign national population in Japan.

In contrast, the presence of Southeast Asian migrants in Japan has steadily increased through diverse and ongoing inflows from their countries of origin. While there was a notable arrival in the early 1980s of refugees from Indochina (Kawakami 2008; Goodman et al. 2003), their numbers have been subsequently augmented by the arrival of international students and technical trainees. Within the latter group, Vietnamese migrants constitute a particularly large and rapidly growing population, increasing from approximately 8,000 refugees in the 1980s to 634,361 individuals by the end of 2024, currently representing the primary source of foreign labor and the second-largest foreign national population in Japan. The precarious status of these predominantly temporary migrant workers has hindered their ability to establish stable communities and secure fundamental assets, such as housing ownership and land access, which are essential for long-term settlement and agricultural development (Liu-Farrer 2020). Meanwhile, Cambodian migrants, having followed a comparable migration trajectory as the Vietnamese, have developed more centralized enclaves and online networks, owing to the more modest number of migrants and the strength of pre-existing solidarities.

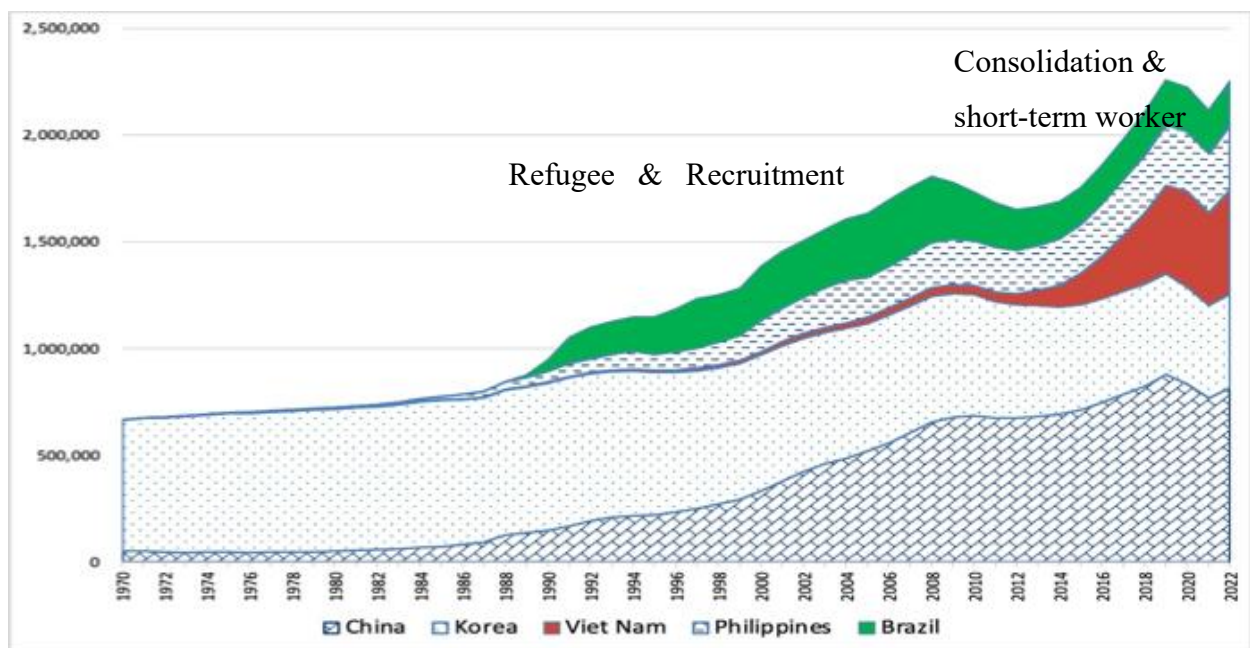


Figure 1. Top 5 countries among foreigner population in Japan

Source: Based on IPSS (2024)

Previous studies on migrant foodways in Japan have predominantly concentrated on single migrant group and permanent residents/oldcomers. One distinctive work, by Seto-Suh (2023), investigated the procurement of home-country food within the Vietnamese refugee community in Himeji, Hyogo, emphasizing the key role of local food production in supplementing perishable cultural plants and meat that are unavailable in the mainstream market. Our study aligns with Seto-Suh's categorization, viewing that ethnically dried condiments and meat products are sourced through imports or local butchers. Cultivation of heritage food plants, particularly tropical varieties of coriander, water spinach and chilies that are uncommon in Japan, is essential for maintaining the original flavors of home, and expressing cultural identities and fostering a sense of belonging in a new environment.

The contrast between the experiences of Brazilian and Southeast Asian migrants provides a fascinating window into the complex dynamics of migrant foodways in Japan. While Brazilians of Japanese descent initially arrived as “returning” migrants with privileged visa status but limited knowledge of contemporary Japanese society, Southeast Asians began as refugees and gradually expanded through various migration channels, maintaining cultural and geographic proximity to their homelands. Although both groups are often categorized as sources of cheap migrant labor, Nikkei Brazilians had opportunities to pursue agriculture as supplementary income in times of economic distress. Agriculture has been prominent particularly for low-paid factory workers and elderly individuals who, after being laid off, were unable to find new employment. For Vietnamese and Cambodian migrants, however, the possibility of being full-time farmers is restricted. A few exceptions exist, such as among Vietnamese immigrants with refugee backgrounds in Himeji who were able to negotiate the rental of agricultural land from aging Japanese neighbors (Seto-Suh 2023).

Key differences in structural conditions—between Brazilians with stable legal status but cultural distance, and Southeast Asians with more precarious status but greater cultural and geographic proximity—resulted in distinct patterns in how these communities developed local food infrastructures, preserved cultural identities, and integrated within Japanese society over time.

Migrant Food Infrastructure and Community Building

Migrant integration, a crucial indicator of long-term evaluation of economic, cultural and social relationships between migrants and the host society, has evolved beyond the traditional expectation of unidirectional assimilation. Contemporary perspectives view integration as a reciprocal process involving both migrant adaptation and host accommodation (Macleod 2021; Parasecoli 2014). While governmental policies often focus on provisions such as language classes, vocational training, and cultural orientation, bottom-up initiatives originating within local

organizations and migrant communities frequently exert more meaningful and practical influence on migrants' lives. The recognition and inclusion of migrants' ethnic and culinary cultures can enrich the diversity of the host society at national and local levels.

Similar to other facets of migrant culture, accommodations to migrant foodways often fall outside governmental considerations or rely on imports from distant markets (Kershen 2016). This oversight stems from a perception by receiving governments that assimilation into the mainstream food culture represent an ideal pathway for migrants' upward mobility and societal integration, which may overlook the values of migrants' heritage cuisine and daily diets. Even in multiethnic societies with substantial migrant population, sustaining migrant foodways heavily depends on the import of "exotic" spices, ingredients and other materials – often in forms of frozen, dried or canned products (Yılmaz-Hava et al. 2024). The creation of local infrastructure supporting migrant foodways, particularly systems for the cultivation, distribution and consumption of cultural plant foods by and within migrant groups, can nurture meaningful connections and interactions between ethnic food producers and consumers in the host community.

For migrant communities, the maintenance of traditional food culture serves as a common coping mechanism in the face of massive changes and uncertainties associated with migration (Berggreen-Clausen et al. 2021). This continuity of food practices can help migrants navigate unfamiliar food systems, economic precarity and hostility within the host society. In this context, Japan has often self-represented itself as an ethnically homogenous country, providing a pretext for more stringent expectations of assimilation and xenophobia (Liu-Farrer 2020; Carvalho 2003), particularly, as we document, in locales (such as rural areas) with strong norms of conformity. Even as the demographic reality, and ensuing expectations, shift alongside growing immigration in Japan, existing habits and strategies for managing the pressure to assimilate persist alongside new willingness to express cultural distinctiveness.

Typically, first-generation immigrants adhere to eating practices from their home country (Lillekroken et al. 2024). These familiar food practices at home are frequently characterized by diversity, local sourcing and freshly harvesting for household consumption, underscoring the importance of agriculture and self-subsistence for migrants. Therefore, it is important to create spaces that not only allow migrants access their home-country food but also enable the preservation of their traditional food-related activities, including farming and producing home food (Crossland-Marr and Krause 2023).

Drawing on the concept of "migrant infrastructure" as articulated by Jung and Buhr (2022), this study aims to understand the complex mediations that regulate and shape migrant foodways practices. Firstly, we conceptualize migrant food infrastructure as the material conditions that

sustain connections with the country of origin and cultural identities among migrant communities. This includes practices such as procuring ethnic ingredients, adhering traditional recipes and sharing foods, highlighting the ongoing transnational flows of food-related materials, information and people from the sending country. Secondly, it encompasses the socio-cultural infrastructure that establishes a local foundation for other migrant-supported activities, including the reproduction, distribution and consumption of home-country food within the host environment. In this sense, local infrastructure for migrant foodways can facilitate the localization of traditional foods in new socio-ecological contexts, fostering the stabilization of migrant lives, building connections centered around food and promoting broader societal integration.

Furthermore, international migration is linked to the globalization of materials, capital, and information, which accelerate the continuous movement of human and formation of migrant community. In contrast to the one-way assimilation experienced by previous generations, contemporary newcomers, often young, highly motivated and proficient in information and communication technology (ICT), can have more options and means to communicate and establish communities in this globalized era (Marino 2018; Hillyer 2021). For these younger migrants, community affiliation can signify connections to both their original homes and their new places of residence. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the influences of ICT applications and online social networks on the localization and transformation of migrant foodways and the establishment of a sense of community within migrant groups or with the host's neighboring community.

In examining migrant food infrastructure in Japan, we focus on both the physical spaces in which food is produced, distributed, and consumed, and the social connections that these activities engender. These infrastructures include not only the specific places where migrants grow, sell, or share food—community gardens, ethnic grocery stores, weekend markets, festival venues—but also the relationships, knowledge exchange, and mutual support that emerge through food-related activities. Particularly important are the engagements around seasonal festivals and holidays, where food production and preparation become central to maintaining cultural traditions and fostering community cohesion in the new environment.

For both Brazilian and Southeast Asian communities, these food infrastructures have evolved from mere survival mechanisms to sophisticated networks that support cultural preservation while facilitating various forms of integration within Japanese society (Liu-Farrer 2020). How these infrastructures developed, and the distinct forms they took among these three different migrant groups, reveals much about the complex dynamics of belonging in a society traditionally resistant to immigration.

Research Approach

The data for this study were derived from participant observation, semi-structured interviews and the mapping of foodway resources of Brazilian, Vietnamese and Cambodian migrants in Japan. Along with a traditional ethnography approach, the research incorporates the observation of ethnic food markets on online social media, particularly Facebook, for exchanging ethnic groceries. This method aims to capture the nuanced communication between sellers and consumers regarding ethnic food products, and map out diverse landscapes of migrant foodways resources and potential inter-group interactions that may be less gathered through in-person interviews.

The selection of research sites was predicated on the national distribution patterns of specific migrant population and the historical narratives of migrant mobility and community formation, tracing back to the initial documented arrivals in the 1980s. One typical characteristic of Vietnamese migrants is the geographically dispersed distribution of residence across the country, ranging from part-time staff in central Tokyo's convenience stores to agricultural labor in rural Hokkaido and factory workers in Hyogo. This distribution is largely a consequence of governmental policies concerning refugee settlement, and the recruitment of short-term migrant laborers (e.g., technical trainees and international students), whose placements were typically determined by their designated working or studying locations. For the smaller number of Cambodian migrants, the geographically-limited anchoring by long-term residents from the 1980s and wide sharing of virtual networks has led to the development of more distinct enclaves.

The positionality of the author team also provides a unique lens for a wide-ranging encounter with different migrant communities and reflections on the change of migrant food practices over time. The first author, a member of the Vietnamese migrant community in Kyoto, has actively participated in numerous intra-ethnic activities in nearby Osaka and Himeji prefectures. The study of Vietnamese migrant groups is also informed by the first author's personal trajectory of a transition from a short-term migrant since 2018 to a long-term immigrant in Japan. This insider access to Vietnamese communities is complemented regionally by a secondary author's immigrant status in Japan and long-term engagement as a researcher of Cambodian studies, including migration within Southeast Asia. Another secondary author, a Japanese native, has lived in Brazil, speaks Portuguese, and has studied Brazilian foodways as in other countries.

Our research approach combines multiple methodologies to capture the diverse experiences of migrant communities in Japan. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with migrants involved in food production, distribution, and consumption, we documented how individuals and communities maintain and adapt their foodways in the Japanese context. These interviews were conducted in

participants' preferred languages—Portuguese, Vietnamese, or Japanese—ensuring that cultural nuances and personal experiences were accurately captured.

Beyond formal interviews, significant insights came from participation in community events centered around food—harvest festivals, weekend markets, religious celebrations, and community garden activities. This participation allowed observation of not just what migrants grow, distribute and eat, but how food practices create spaces for cultural expression and community building.

Additionally, our analysis of online communities, particularly Facebook groups dedicated to ethnic food exchange, revealed the importance of digital spaces in connecting migrants living in diverse locations, facilitating knowledge sharing, and enabling economic activities around traditional foods. These virtual communities have become especially important for all migrant groups we studied, as resources and communities are dispersed throughout Japan and interconnection with other regional migrants has become more common.

This section analyzes the distinct foodways of three migrant groups—Brazilian, Vietnamese and Cambodian migrants—with varying ethnic and geographical proximity to Japanese society. It examines how these agriculture-food practices serve as adaptive and dynamic spaces for negotiating cultural resilience, building viable communities and promoting meaningful integrations.

Migrant Agriculture as Cultural Continuity and Adaptation

For migrants in Japan, the eventual practice of agriculture and food distribution not only serves as a living connection to cultural references from distant homelands, but also anchors them in new terrain. The weathered hands tending cassava plants or morning glory vines carry memories of cultivation practices learned in childhood and adapted to unfamiliar climates. They also reflect, in the case of Nikkei Brazilians, a reversal of the culinary adaptation their ancestors underwent upon arrival in Brazil in the early 20th century (Funabashi 2021).

When Sergio (pseudonym), a third-generation Nikkei Brazilian with roots in Okinawa, faced repeated failures growing cassava through Japanese winters, he didn't abandon the crop central to Brazilian cooking. Instead, he created a transnational growing circuit, sending plants to relatives in subtropical Okinawa for winter safekeeping before their return as spring seedlings. Broadly speaking, Brazilian and longer-term Southeast Asian migrants share an intention to reproduce culinary practices, often involving subtle adjustments or more significant innovations, such as substituting similar vegetables, scouting new sources of ingredients and modifying food preparation principles (Yılmaz-Hava et al. 2024). Their ingenuity reveals the creative lengths to which migrants preserve foods that matter.

Mario's (pseudonym) story similarly speaks to agriculture as place-making. Despite initial plans to return to Brazil in 2014, he remained in Japan at his wife's request as their children settled nearby. What began as vegetable plots on land leased from an elderly Japanese farmer grew to include chickens and pigs, creating a miniature Brazilian farm ecosystem in rural Kansai. Doing so was not only a test of his entrepreneurialism, but also navigating what Mario, Sergio and other informants highlighted as the communication, cultural, and bureaucratic context of Japanese rural communities that may dampen the dynamism of newcomers. A similar story of land access was informed by Walter (pseudonym), a Nikkei Brazilian who was a semi-professional soccer player back in Brazil. Seeking better income opportunities, he moved to Japan. His father was a farmer who grew a variety of subsistence crops for a local cooperative, and Walter has always enjoyed farm work—especially growing cassava, something he used to do in Brazil. In Japan, he began cultivating cassava on a plot of land he accessed through a Japanese acquaintance he met via his soccer network. Over time, he expanded to multiple plots in the area and now grows cassava on a medium scale (see Figure 2). Pushing through such barriers is not always a given for those with uncertain long-term plans for remaining in Japan, a condition euphemistically called “permanent temporality” that has been used to characterize many Brazilian migrants' experience (Beltrão and Sugahara 2006).



Figure 2. A cassava field bordered by banana plants and next to a rice paddy in Japan (Source: authors).

Vietnamese agricultural practices have evolved toward community endeavors, notably in the Multicultural Garden established in Kobe in 2019. Managed by Vietnamese immigrants with municipal support, the garden repurposes abandoned urban land damaged in the 1995 earthquake. Here, Vietnamese migrants grow tropical herbs like coriander alongside local vegetables, creating seasonal rhythms that blend homeland and local agricultural knowledge (Gastropolis Kobe 2023). This community-oriented approach contrasts with the individualized plots more common among Brazilians, reflecting different patterns of settlement and land access.

The earliest migrants—Vietnamese former refugees in the 1980s and the first Cambodian refugees—lacked even these limited options (Kawakami 2008; Seto-Suh 2023). They gathered wild plants from forests and fields that resembled homeland varieties and grew herbs in styrofoam containers on apartment balconies. Small-scale and often invisible to officials, these practices nevertheless formed crucial links to distant culinary traditions, a more individualized third place (in contrast to restaurants) for creating familiarity and nostalgia (Wessendorf and Farrer 2021).

What unites these diverse agricultural adaptations is their role in knowledge transmission across generations. When Roberta (pseudonym), a Brazilian in her 60s, cultivates *jiló* and *chuchu* on her rented plot, she draws on farming knowledge learned as a child. Her partner Tadashi assists despite his night-shift factory job, recalling techniques learned from his aunt in Brazil. Among Vietnamese and Cambodian communities, similar intergenerational gardening activities preserve cultivation knowledge while adapting to new environmental contexts.

“We cultivate because of *saudade*,” explained one Brazilian farmer, using the Portuguese word for a complex sense of longing and nostalgia. This sentiment captures how growing food becomes about nurturing emotional connections to homeland while simultaneously establishing new belonging through relationship to land.

Food Distribution Systems: From Physical Enclaves to Virtual Networks

The pathways through which culturally meaningful foods reach migrant communities reveal distinct patterns of settlement, mobility, and technological adaptation. The contrast between concentrated Brazilian enclaves and dispersed but digitally connected Vietnamese communities tell a story not just about food, but about the structural conditions shaping migrant lives in Japan.

In prefectures like Shizuoka and Aichi, Brazilian migrants have established distinct ethnic enclaves supported by relatively privileged visa status. Here, networks of farmers, gardeners, and food vendors create localized food ecosystems where culturally significant ingredients circulate through both in-person exchanges and social media platforms (Tsuda 1999). Mario’s contributes to these networks as he sells cassava and other Brazilian crops to compatriots while sharing



Figure 4. Vietnamese and other Southeast Asia products at Don Quijote market in Japan. (Source: authors)

The proliferation of Vietnamese groceries near transportation hubs further supports this dispersed community. These stores offer not just ingredients but comprehensive community infrastructure—places for information exchange, event planning, and even services like remittance transfers. These centers serve as vital resources for newly arrived migrants seeking familiar culinary traditions, fostering social networks, facilitating access to essential services such as legal consultation, employment assistance, and remittance transfers, as well as hosting communal gatherings (e.g., karaoke sessions, wedding receptions). During *Tết* (Lunar New Year), these stores become particularly important as they source hard-to-find

ceremonial foods like *bánh chưng* (sticky rice cakes filled with sweet or savory ingredients) and special fruits for ancestral altars. Furthermore, patronage extends beyond the Vietnamese diaspora to encompass other Asian migrants (e.g., from China, Cambodia, Myanmar), who frequent these establishments in pursuit of similar home flavors, as well as Japanese and Western consumers interested in Southeast Asian cuisine.

The Cambodian distribution systems reflect their smaller population and more concentrated settlement. In Sagami-hara, home to Japan's primary Cambodian enclave, a single dedicated Khmer ingredient shop serves the community alongside informal exchanges. Community leaders note that many Cambodians also rely on Vietnamese stores for ingredients common to both cuisines, demonstrating how smaller migrant groups may depend on infrastructure established by larger communities with similar culinary needs (Goodman et al. 2003).

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed these distribution systems as border restrictions interrupted established supply chains. Vietnamese entrepreneurs responded by intensifying domestic cultivation of tropical vegetables and herbs, creating more localized and resilient food networks.

Brazilian seed-saving networks similarly expanded during this period, strengthening local production capabilities when imports became less reliable.

What emerges from these varied distribution patterns is a picture of migrant communities constantly adapting to structural constraints through creative use of available resources, technologies, and social connections. The resulting food networks do far more than move ingredients from point A to point B—they create crucial infrastructure for community formation and cultural continuity in new contexts.

Commensality and Community Building Through Food

Shared meals create communities. This simple truth takes on heightened significance for migrants navigating life in unfamiliar terrain, where cooking and eating together becomes a powerful way to create belonging while preserving cultural knowledge.

Brazilian migrants have developed particularly creative approaches to commensality. Sergio's "u-pick" cassava harvests transform agricultural labor into social events where participants—fellow Brazilians, Southeast Asians, and occasionally Japanese neighbors—dig, weigh, and purchase cassava while building relationships across cultural boundaries. These gatherings solve practical farming challenges while creating informal spaces, in which where diverse migrants interact through shared activity rather than formal "multicultural" programs, such as festivals organized by municipal governments (Parasecoli 2014). The harvest events help address labor shortages during peak harvesting periods and create economic accessibility through direct producer-to-consumer sales. Participants learn traditional harvesting techniques while exchanging knowledge about cassava preparation across cultural backgrounds.

Serving a similar communicative function, collaborative cooking events are organized to make traditional dishes like *pamonha*, a corn-based sweet prepared using Brazilian corn varieties cultivated in Japan. These gatherings bring together multiple generations of Brazilian migrants, with elders teaching youngsters techniques that would otherwise be lost. Sergio collaborates with a local Brazilian restaurant for these events, creating temporary communal cooking spaces where participants reconnect with homeland traditions through shared labor and sensory experience.

The relationship between Roberta, a Brazilian farmer, and Fabiana (pseudonym), a school worker, illuminates how food exchange strengthens community bonds. After 28 years in factory work, Roberta was laid off and turned to full-time farming, drawing on agricultural skills learned in her childhood. Fabiana purchases Roberta's vegetables weekly—partly for the authentic flavor of *couve manteiga* (collard greens) and *jiló* (scarlet eggplant) in her family's meals, but equally as an act of solidarity with another migrant making a living through cultural knowledge. By collecting

orders from other Brazilian parents at the school where she works and distributing vegetables from this central location, Fabiana extends circles of mutual support beyond direct producer-consumer relationships. This arrangement builds economic resilience for Roberta while strengthening social connections among Brazilian families who gather briefly during vegetable pickups, sharing recipes and news from home.

“The other day I sold a lot of lettuce, because I had planted a lot. I sold two heads for 100 yen—really cheap. That’s how it is. I didn’t want to sell it for a high price. (...) I only sell to the ones who come here to Rataque (vegetable field), because they already come and help me. I sell cheap to because they help me. Some help me turn the soil.”

“Personally, I like it... I like the kids too, you know? We and some friends sometimes come on weekends, in the morning, and help out. The girls, not so much, but the boys help me a lot.” (Nathalia (pseudonym) – Brazilian migrant farmer)

Vietnamese food practices blend traditional gatherings with digital community-building. Festival celebrations, particularly around *Tết*, create physical gatherings where elaborate dishes like *bánh chưng* and special fruits for ancestral altars reinforce cultural identity. Preparation of these foods often begins days in advance, with multiple households gathering to undertake labor-intensive steps collectively. Parents use these occasions to transmit Vietnamese cultural values to children through hands-on involvement in food preparation and consumption of traditional dishes like spring rolls and various rice noodle soups. Some informants stated that occasional family trips back to their home country during holidays, depending on the work schedule, further reinforce these food-based cultural connections and promote the continuity of these practices in the host society, as has been found in numerous cases in other migration contexts (Marino 2018).

Yet Vietnamese commensality increasingly involves virtual components. Facebook groups dedicated to Vietnamese food in Japan function not just as marketplaces but as knowledge-sharing platforms where recipes, techniques, and images of traditional dishes circulate among geographically dispersed communities. Young Vietnamese migrants, separated from family and often working in isolated factory settings, maintain cultural connections through these online food communities. A technical trainee in rural Japan might share photos and videos of home-cooked Vietnamese dishes with compatriots across the country, receiving affirmation of cultural belonging despite physical distance from ethnic enclaves.

The municipality backed Multicultural Community Garden in Kobe highlights another form of commensality and community centered on food production rather than consumption. Vietnamese gardeners cultivate aromatic herbs and tropical vegetables in summer (e.g., morning glory, amaranth, gourds and Thai basil) and temperate vegetables in winter (e.g., radish, onion and

mustard greens), creating a year-round cycle of cultivation activities (see Figure 5). The garden received municipal support following the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake, positioning Vietnamese migrants as contributors to urban revitalization (Gastropolis Kobe 2023). By donating portions of their harvest to community meals and sharing with Japanese neighbors, participants create connections that extend beyond ethnic boundaries. Regular communal meals prepared with garden produce bring together Vietnamese migrants, other foreign residents, and Japanese community members in spaces of egalitarian cultural exchange. The transformation of an abandoned urban parcel into a managed community garden not only increased the visibility of familiarity of Vietnamese migrant food systems in the community, but also managed to reduce the insect nuisance coming from the previously weedy space.



Figure 5. Multicultural Community Garden managed by a Vietnamese migrant group (Source: Garden's Facebook page)

Driven by a desire to share their culinary heritage and culture, Vietnamese and Cambodian migrants in Japan have established regional cooking classes, catering to Japanese and international participants, or younger generation members of their communities. Cambodian cooking classes organized by the Cambodian Community of Japan NPO address perceived concerns about culinary knowledge preservation. Held monthly in Hiratsuka (next to Yokohama), where the first substantial Cambodian community was established through refugee

resettlement, these classes bring together youth and elders to document and transmit traditional recipes and techniques (see Figure 6). Participants sometimes travel considerable distances to attend, coming from smaller Cambodian settlements in Osaka, Utsunomiya, and Fukuoka. Beyond technical knowledge, these gatherings transmit cultural values and history through food narratives

that connect young people who were born and grew up in Japan to a homeland many have never visited.



Figure 6. Advertisement for Cambodian cooking classes (Source: Cambodia Community of Japan’s Facebook page)

A variation on cultural transmission is visible from the Betoaji NGO (a pun for “Viet Taste” in Japanese), founded in 2012 by motivated Vietnamese international students and youths in Japan. With ten branches, including one in Hanoi for Vietnamese returnees from Japan, Betoaji introduces Vietnamese food and culture while donating the profit to support children with difficult backgrounds, mostly in rural Vietnam. Their outreach extends through multilingual Facebook advertisements in Japanese, English, and Vietnamese (see Figure 7). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Betoaji published a cookbook in 2022, featuring 56 recipes of popular Vietnamese dishes presented in Japanese language and including explanations of Southeast ethnic ingredients along with guidance on sourcing them within Japan. This demonstrates their eagerness to continue representing their cuisine to broader audiences, while contextualizing cuisine in a self-aware way (Salas et al. 2022). Thus, cooking classes hosted by immigrant groups, as illustrated in cases of Cambodian and Vietnamese communities, are important not only to socialize and transmit recipes to the next generation, but also to reveal how ingredients are procured or processed differently as part of adaptation to Japanese food markets.

The fragility and resilience of such culinary knowledge came into sharp focus when a beloved Osaka-based Cambodian restaurant owner known for traditional fish fermentation techniques passed away in December 2024. Her small establishment had long been the only dedicated Khmer restaurant in the Kansai region, serving as both culinary resource and community gathering space. Her death represented the loss of irreplaceable knowledge, yet also galvanized community documentation efforts, particularly among Japanese regulars, to preserve her techniques before they disappeared entirely. Such a response is not common in the boom-and-bust ethnic food industry (Heldke 2001). These preservation activities have created new intergenerational connections within the Cambodian community while raising awareness among Japanese neighbors about distinctive Cambodian culinary traditions (Kawakami 2008).

Religious and seasonal celebrations provide particularly important contexts for commensality across all migrant groups. Buddhist ceremonies among Southeast Asians incorporate temple foods that connect participants to homeland spiritual traditions. Catholic celebrations among Brazilians feature dishes rarely prepared in everyday contexts due to labor intensity and specialty ingredients. In both cases, traditional foods take on heightened significance in displacement, creating powerful sensory experiences that momentarily transport participants across geographic distance. These special-occasion foods—whether Vietnamese *Tét* cakes, Cambodian festival desserts, or Brazilian Christmas dishes—become vessels for cultural memory, evoking homeland landscapes and social relationships despite physical separation.

Through these varied forms of commensality—from harvest events to festival celebrations and cooking classes—migrants create spaces where belonging is negotiated, cultural knowledge travels across generations, and sometimes bridges form with Japanese society. What makes these food-centered gatherings particularly significant is their ability to create community in contexts where linguistic barriers, precarious employment, and residential dispersion might otherwise prevent meaningful connection. The simple act of eating together becomes a profound statement about community in a new land, providing nourishment that is simultaneously physical, cultural, and emotional.

Food as Expression of Migrant Identities in Transition

The foods migrants grow, cook, and eat speak volumes about their positioning between cultures. In the Japanese context, where assimilation pressure can be intense despite limited integration support, food practices become particularly significant expressions of identity in flux. In contrast to immigrant countries in North America, or former colonial powers, where migration chains, well-resourced enclaves, and numerous generations of migrant families have expanded the possibilities for new migrants to smooth adaptation, there are fewer options laid out by migrants to Japan from the early waves in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, as we document, maintaining vegetables and preparation techniques are still spoken of by early migrants as methods to sustain self-esteem in a society where they feel unwelcome.

This ambivalence surfaces in Mario's agricultural choices. Growing both Japanese rice and Brazilian cassava, raising livestock using techniques from both countries, he creates a landscape reflecting his family's suspended state between temporary and permanent residence. Livestock raising is also a common expression of deeper rootedness, in which subtleties, such as how the chickens are raised and butchered in a Brazilian way, become increasingly sought as time passes (see Figure 8). His wife Marisa, once committed to settling in Japan, now feels drawn to Brazil to

be near her aging mother. Their food practices neither fully embrace Japan nor simply reproduce Brazil, but create something new that accommodates their lived experience of migration.

Brazilian migrants' relationship with *Hanaume* offers a window into complex cultural positioning that goes beyond a host country/homeland dichotomy of botanical loyalty. This plant, cherished by Japanese immigrants in Brazil for its sour fruit resembling umeboshi (pickled plum), represents not connection to ancestral Japan but to the hybrid Nikkei culture that evolved in Brazil (Funabashi 2021). When grown in Japan, *Hanaume* embodies what scholars call a “squared diaspora” identity—Brazilian-Japanese rather than simply Brazilian or Japanese (Tsuda 1999). Its cultivation speaks to migrants' multifaceted relationships with both homeland and host country.



Figure 7. A Brazilian-Japanese farmer raising chicken varieties more suited to Brazilian cuisine.

Vietnamese food identities reveal different patterns of adaptation. Facebook advertisements for *Tết* showcase both imported products and locally produced innovations like Vietnamese-inspired cakes with Japanese ingredients. Young Vietnamese migrants, often navigating between factory work and entrepreneurial food businesses, develop culinary practices that maintain core traditions while incorporating new elements. The Multicultural Garden's seasonal shifts between tropical herbs in summer and local vegetables in winter embodies this flexible approach to cultural identity. For these younger migrants, digital food communities become particularly important identity spaces. A Vietnamese technical trainee in a rural factory might connect virtually with compatriots across Japan through food-focused social media, maintaining cultural connections despite physical isolation. These online communities enable cultural knowledge exchange while facilitating adaptation to Japanese ingredients and cooking techniques.

Cambodian gastro-diplomacy efforts reflect yet another identity orientation. As Cambodia experiences culinary renaissance with growing international recognition, migrants in Japan have grown more assertive in promoting food traditions. Embassy-sponsored events featuring celebrity chefs position Cambodian cuisine as sophisticated and worthy of appreciation, challenging marginalization of Southeast Asian food cultures. This represents a shift from earlier periods when Cambodian identity remained largely hidden within community settings.

The emotional dimensions of these food practices reveal much about migrant experience. The *saudade* (longing) that drives Brazilian cultivation, the care Vietnamese parents take to teach children traditional cooking, and the urgency with which Cambodians document disappearing techniques all speak to food's role in maintaining emotional connections to distant homelands.

Yet these practices rarely represent simple preservation. Instead, they show migrants navigating between cultural frameworks, creating foodways that respond to their reality of movement between worlds. Through these evolving food practices, migrants express identities neither fully Japanese nor simply transplanted from homelands—identities formed through the lived experience of displacement, adaptation, and making home in new terrain.

Cross-Cultural Exchange and Integration Through Foodways

While migrant food practices often strengthen connections within ethnic communities, they also create significant opportunities for meaningful engagement with Japanese society. These cross-cultural exchanges rarely follow assimilationist patterns; instead, they suggest models of integration that respect cultural difference while fostering mutual understanding.

Brazilian agricultural practices necessitate direct engagement with Japanese landowners and rural communities. Mario's struggle to adapt to unwritten rules and develop local credibility as he leased and eventually purchased farmland reveals not only how unique challenges face newcomer migrant farmers, but also how food production creates contexts for cross-cultural learning. As elderly Japanese farmers offered land to this skilled and committed Brazilian cultivator, relationships formed despite language barriers and cultural differences. These exchanges, based on shared agricultural knowledge rather than abstract multiculturalism, suggest pathways to integration through practical collaboration (Tsuda 1999).

Community harvest events expand these opportunities for interaction. When Sergio invites Japanese neighbors to join cassava harvests, the unfamiliar root becomes a conversation starter rather than a marker of difference. Similarly, cooking events centered on Brazilian specialties provide opportunities for Japanese participants to learn about unfamiliar ingredients and techniques. These informal exchanges, occurring through shared activity rather than didactic

cultural explanation, often prove more effective at building cross-cultural understanding than formal exchange programs.

Vietnamese migrants have developed distinctive integration approaches through food. The Kobe community garden brings together Vietnamese herbs and Japanese vegetables, creating a space where migrant agricultural knowledge contributes to urban revitalization. By donating portions of their harvest to community meals and sharing with neighbors, Vietnamese gardeners position themselves as contributors to local society rather than isolated cultural preservationists (Gastropolis Kobe 2023).

The increasing presence of Vietnamese ingredients in Japanese markets and growing popularity of Vietnamese restaurants among Japanese consumers suggests broader cultural diffusion through food. Unlike Brazilian ingredients that remain largely within ethnic enclaves, Vietnamese staples like rice paper have achieved wider market penetration. This difference partly reflects Vietnamese cuisine's compatibility with Japanese taste preferences for fresh vegetables and light seasonings, allowing easier crossover into mainstream food culture while implying authenticity (Salas et al. 2022).

Cambodian gastro-diplomacy offers yet another approach to cross-cultural exchange. Embassy-sponsored food events in Tokyo target Japanese audiences, positioning Cambodian cuisine as part of Japan's increasingly diverse food landscape. By featuring both traditional dishes and contemporary innovations, these events present Cambodian food culture as dynamic rather than static, challenging potential exoticization of Southeast Asian traditions.

These varied food-based interactions create what anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt calls "contact zones"—social spaces where cultures meet and engage with each other and, in certain contexts, perhaps slowly move beyond fleeting or superficial encounters (Wessendorf and Farrer 2021). While not without tension, these engagements generally foster positive interaction and respect that can enrich both migrant communities and Japanese society. As we have shown, this can happen beyond the typical restaurant space, such as when Japanese agricultural techniques influence migrant farming, while migrant ingredients gradually enter Japanese markets. These interactions can be reproduced even without contact zones, such as when traditional migrant recipes adapt to available equipment and ingredients, while Japanese consumers develop a taste for new flavors.

The Brazilian farmer growing both Japanese rice and Brazilian cassava, the Vietnamese community garden cultivating herbs from both countries, and the Cambodian cooking class adapting recipes to Japanese ingredients all demonstrate how food practices facilitate integration while maintaining cultural distinctiveness. As Japan confronts demographic decline and increasing

reliance on foreign workers, these food-based forms of cross-cultural exchange offer valuable lessons in creating a more inclusive society.

The Co-existence Multiplier of Latecomer Migrant Foodways in Japan

The food practices of Brazilian, Vietnamese, and Cambodian migrants in Japan reveal much about the complex processes of identity-making and belonging in a society often resistant to cultural difference. Far from simple cultural preservation, these diverse foodways represent active negotiations of identity, community, and integration in response to specific structural conditions. In this sense, migrant identity in food culture become a fluid expression of their unique intercultural position, which does not necessary conflict with other national or ethnic frameworks (Carvalho 2003; Tsuda 2003). The privileged visa status of Brazilians enabled concentrated enclaves with elaborate agricultural infrastructure, while Southeast Asians' more precarious standing spurred digital innovations that transcend physical dispersal. Yet both approaches demonstrate remarkable creativity in maintaining cultural connections while establishing new roots in the digital age.

These food-centered activities create contemporary spaces of meaningful exchange that formal integration policies rarely achieve. When Japanese landowners recognize a Brazilian farmer's skill with unfamiliar crops, when Vietnamese gardeners contribute to urban revitalization, or when Cambodian cooking classes preserve endangered knowledge, new forms of cross-cultural understanding emerge organically through shared practice rather than abstract multiculturalism. The pathways to integration revealed through these food practices suggest models of social cohesion based on mutual recognition rather than assimilation.

As Japan navigates demographic decline and growing reliance on foreign workers, these migrant foodways offer valuable lessons. The localization of migrant food culture through both physical and digital infrastructure not only benefits to migrants' construction of identity and community, but also assists the mainstream society in accepting these "new" members. The cassava field bordering a rice paddy, the community garden blending Vietnamese herbs with Japanese vegetables, and the Cambodian restaurant adapting traditional techniques to local ingredients all suggest possibilities for a more inclusive society—one that discovers in cultural diversity not a threat but a resource for collective resilience and renewal.

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