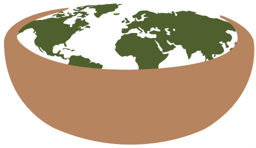

Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Review of:

# Just a Dish?

## Power Dynamics and Gender Roles in Making *Hummoth Kibbeh*

By: Christine J. Widmayer

> This Research Note closely resembles the 2016 Samuelson student paper prize competition submission and represents an early effort to combine autoethnography and creative writing with foodways scholarship. The author developed the work in a larger conceptual framework for her Folklore Studies Master's thesis, which now underlies a more balanced, in-depth study that incorporates feminist food studies, family folklore, her father's voice, and her own experiences and positionality.

"I can't talk long," my mother told me on a November weekend in 2015, "I'm making Hummoth Kibbeh!" I had called to chat—my mother's father had died a couple weeks earlier and I was calling to check in. My intentions were quickly diverted by this proclamation: my mother was making Hummoth Kibbeh—a Chaldean dish, meatball soup in a tomato-based broth. The dish itself is delicious, warm, and regarded as comfort food in my family. But the fact that my mother was making it was surprising because she is not the Chaldean in the family, and almost never participates in our Chaldean food traditions—my father's family is the source of my Chaldean heritage.

In 1910, my paternal great-grandfather, George Najor, immigrated to Detroit, Michigan from what is now Iraq. He later returned to Iraq to retrieve his wife, Mary. George and Mary were Chaldean, a term that currently describes both a cultural group and a branch of the Catholic Church. They were some of the first Chaldean immigrants to the Detroit area. My great-grandfather opened the first Chaldean grocery store in Detroit, through which he sponsored other Chaldean immigrants to the area. By the time he died in 1952, the Chaldean population in Detroit was booming. Today, Detroit is home to

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one of the largest populations of Chaldeans outside the Middle East.

As minorities in Detroit when they first arrived, George and Mary chose to favor American culture. In the decades following their immigration, George and Mary became naturalized American citizens, and raised their children to speak English. Out of their six children, only two married other Chaldeans. One of these, my grandmother Ruth, married my German-American grandfather, Warren, and raised five children including my father, the oldest, also named Warren.

Over time, the descendants of George and Mary Najor lost many of our cultural signifiers. We did not speak Chaldean, a neo-Aramaic language. We did not attend the Chaldean Catholic Church—most of us were still raised Catholic, but Roman Catholic. By the time my generation was growing up, the only clearly recognized cultural signifiers that connected us to our Chaldean heritage were our foodways. For this reason, our food traditions became special and important—for me, Chaldean foods are wrapped up in my personal understanding of what it means to be Chaldean American.

These foods were not purely recreations of dishes from the homeland. Immigrant groups' foodways often undergo a process of selection and creolization. "The common food that first-generation settlers considered everyday sustenance gradually takes on a new luster...it is special, it is different, it sets them apart from other groups" (Kaplan, Hoover, and Moore 1998: 122). This "luster" singles out and intensifies special dishes that become symbols for identity. For my father and his family, their ethnic foodways ostensibly developed over decades—these foods are what the family chose to identify their Chaldean identity. Foodways often become symbols of the ethnic group (Lockwood & Lockwood 2000: 516). These symbols are also performances—performative gestures, which, as Susan Kalčik argues, "provide a whole area of performance in which statements of identity can be made—in preparing, eating, serving, forbidding, and talking about food" (Kalčik 1985: 54). Over the years, my father's family selected certain Chaldean dishes to perform as reminders of its Chaldean identity—these dishes now stand for something more, and have become special, festive foods.

But for my mother, Beth, whose national heritage is German, Polish, and


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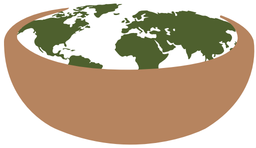



French, Chaldean food does not resonate in the same way. Beth believes that you cannot claim Chaldean heritage without being Chaldean by blood. Therefore, she doesn't believe she has Chaldean heritage—her husband has Chaldean heritage, and her children do too, but she does not claim that heritage for herself. My mother told me two things when I confessed my surprise that she was attempting to make Hummoth Kibbeh on her own: first, she said she was nervous; then, she raved about how much she loved my father and wanted to make it for him. The first thought was unsurprising—she was tackling a traditional family food that comes with expectations and pressure. The second was a direct result of how supportive my father had been in light of my mother's grief: she wanted to "reward" him with this food they both loved and rarely made.

Instances of wives connecting to their husband's heritage or ethnic foodways are common—historically, wives learned their husband's favorite dishes when they married into the family, crossing these ethnic boundaries (see Najor 1981, Counihan 2005, and Avakian 2005). But in my family, Beth had rarely participated in Chaldean food traditions. Through observation of Beth cooking Hummoth Kibbeh and interviews with Beth, I explore—as part of a longer, deeper research project currently in progress—what it means for Beth to engage with this Chaldean dish. How is it related to her own history, identity, and role in the family? What does it mean for her to take on this Chaldean dish? Understanding Beth's choice to engage with this Chaldean tradition requires a deep understanding of her past experiences cooking, and her relationship with my father. Knowing Beth's backstory clarifies why Beth chose this dish on this day at this point in her life.

## A Lifetime of Cooking

Beth was born in Washington, D.C. in April 1957. Though both of her parents were originally from the Detroit metro-area of Michigan, her father was in the Judge Advocate General Corps, serving in Arlington, Virginia. When he was discharged, the family returned to Grosse Pointe, Michigan to be near Beth's parents' families. Beth's mother stayed at home with the kids, while her father worked as a lawyer. They had three


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more children after Beth, and when Beth was a teenager, they moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where Beth graduated from high school.

Beth started cooking when she was nine years old. She recalls being in the fourth grade when her mother broke her wrist. Beth's parents sat her down and said she had to help out. So Beth started to cook for her family. It was rare that Beth's mother directly instructed her in cooking. Beth describes sitting in the kitchen with her mother because she "adored her" and "loved to listen to her talk." As she watched her mother cook, Beth picked up on recipes. Occasionally, she would act as an assistant when her mother was cooking, but typically she just washed the dishes.

The first dish Beth learned how to cook independently was her mother's homemade bread. Beth also remembers her Aunt Laurie giving her a Betty Crocker cookbook for Christmas one year, a gift Beth said seemed like "a crappy gift" but turned out to be extremely valuable as Beth grew up. "I remember there was a recipe in it for mashed potatoes and meatloaf," Beth said, "and that was my specialty. You know, it would be my turn and—'Beth, can you make your meatloaf?' And everyone loved it. And so I got the whole feeling of, you know, the reward of being the one that made the great meal." This rewarding feeling motivated Beth to continue cooking.

Beth started to cook more often as she grew up, especially when her mother was sick or had migraines. One migraine episode in particular prompted one of Beth's favorite stories about learning to cook:

> She said she had a migraine headache, and I was like, "Oh, what should I do for dinner?"
>
> "Oh, I was going to make pork chops and sauerkraut."
>
> And I went down and told my dad, "Mom says to make pork chops and sauerkraut."
>
> And he goes, "I *hate* sauerkraut! *She* likes that stuff! *She's* not even going to eat it! Why are you making that?"
>
> And I go, "That's okay, Dad! I know how to make the pork chops


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> with cream gravy and mashed potatoes that she makes," which was another favorite of mine . . . And I remember *on my own* figuring out that's what I could do with the pork chops instead of the sauerkraut pork chops that she wanted me to do. But that would have been after seventh grade. So I was a little older.
>
> So, I had a lot of experience, I guess, between fourth and seventh grade—watching her cook.

This story demonstrates a certain level of confidence and comfort in the kitchen. By seventh grade, Beth emphasized, she knew how to substitute foods. At that point, Beth acknowledges, she was not even following recipes. With that pork chop dish, she says she made it by trying "a little of this, a little of that" until she got it right. This also demonstrates Beth's level of confidence in cooking, which she finds remarkable looking back. "I didn't have any confidence about any other thing in life. But I knew how to cook." From her childhood onward, cooking was the one thing she felt skilled at.

After graduating from high school, Beth spent a few years at Kalamazoo College before following a boyfriend to San Francisco, California. There she started to encounter foods outside her family tradition—dishes she never had the opportunity to try, and even ingredients she did not like to eat. She started eating mushrooms, tried seafood, and encountered carrot cake for the first time. Though she was eating new foods, she did not start cooking new foods until she met and started dating my father, Warren, after she moved back to Ann Arbor to finish her bachelor's degree at University of Michigan.

Neither Beth nor Warren cooked much during their early days together, beginning in 1980, because they mostly ate out, since they lived in downtown Ann Arbor, and Beth sometimes obtained free dinners when she waitressed or served as a hostess at local restaurants. But when they moved to an addition to an old house outside the city on Pontiac Trail, they started to cook together for the first time.

The Christmas before Beth and Warren moved to their place on Pontiac Trail, Beth's cousin had given her *The Moosewood Cookbook*, a vegetarian cookbook full of recipes that I now consider family



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staples, like vichyssoise and hummus. Beth explains how,

> . . . we were setting up house, and much more domestic, and it was just the two of us. And we would just look through that cookbook, and [say] "Oh, that looks good!" and "Oh, let's try making this hummus stuff!" And I don't think I'd ever had hummus before. I can't remember, but there was a lot of kind of exotic things. . . .
>
> We would come home via the Kroger, and we'd have, okay, we've got our shopping list of this, things that we need to make whatever this was from the Moosewood, and, yeah, we just went through the Moosewood, and we'd make casseroles, and we'd try different things, and you know, develop our repertoire.

This everyday practice of trying a new dish became customary over the year they lived on Pontiac Trail. Both were learning new things about cooking, even though Beth had a confidence in her ability that Warren lacked. Having not really cooked meals growing up, Warren was more of a beginner. Beth, on the other hand, continued her experimentation and felt confident making substitutions and changing recipes:

> One of the things when we first started looking at the Moosewood. . . if I didn't have the right spice, it didn't bother me. Oh, I'll just leave it out, or I'll add cumin, or whatever. Oh, it drove your dad nuts! He wanted everything to be made the way the recipe said . . . I was like, "What the hell!" You know? It said to put artichokes in, we didn't have 'em, so I put in whatever—I can't think of the substitutions. But it's like with Grandpa and the sauerkraut. I was always a very flexible cook. He was not.

Warren's discomfort with deviating from a recipe continues to this day. He is the type of cook, according to Beth, who prides himself on making everything perfect. Warren is slow and careful. Beth, on the other hand, relies on her experience and creativity, which give her more freedom in the kitchen.

Despite these differences in style between Warren's preciseness and Beth's flexibility, their time in the kitchen on Pontiac Trail was an important facet of their relationship. Cooking together in the kitchen was "very much a


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together thing" as Beth puts it, a blissful time before children and careers invaded their solitude as a couple. The kitchen itself became a safe and comfortable place in their house and their relationship. Beth reflected fondly:

> We had a kind of galley kitchen in this place, and in the place on Pontiac Trail—okay, when we first moved in, when it was warm, we would cook in the galley kitchen and then there was a little dining room that was off the kitchen—it was a rectangle. So it was a long living room, and then behind the living room was the kitchen. It was , like, a U-shape. The kitchen, this corner dining room. It had windows, beautiful windows looking out, and this beautiful thing. And we would—we had our TV on the dining room table, and we would sit, and we would probably watch *Jeopardy*! and we would eat. And, you know, that was—it was *heaven*! We loved that.

Beth goes on to say that it was huddled in the kitchen in the middle of a terrible winter storm that Warren asked her to marry him. These warm memories of that kitchen, and their tradition of trying new recipes and bonding over dinner, demonstrate how significant that kitchen was to them. That kitchen was the heart of their relationship, and it was part of their love story, a central place in their lives at that time.

Within a few years of living on Pontiac Trail, Beth and Warren had three children and moved to a suburban neighborhood in Ann Arbor. Beth worked full-time, as did Warren, but Beth also took care of many chores at home, including cooking. Beth's biggest concern through most of my childhood was trying to get Warren to come home for dinner. A workaholic, Warren would work so late that he often did not get home before my mother put us to bed early in the evening. Beth made an early dinner for the children and a late dinner for her and Warren. When I was ten, Beth quit the job she was working with her mother as a healthcare lobbyist to become a writer. For nearly twenty years, Beth has worked from home on her novel. Warren, meanwhile, has been running his own law firm.

A skilled and frequent cook to this day, Beth prepares dinner almost every night, and often makes Warren breakfast as well. However, during all that cooking, Beth has rarely engaged with Warren's Chaldean traditions.


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Understanding the context surrounding Warren's Chaldean traditions illuminates why Beth is so unpracticed in Chaldean foodways.

## Chaldean Foodways: A Rediscovery

Beth knew from the beginning that Warren was Chaldean in background. She also knew that when he was nineteen, Warren's mom died suddenly. These two aspects of Warren's identity and history go hand-in-hand. Warren's mother, Ruth, was the heart of his family. Ruth was also the only connection Warren had to his Chaldean heritage. According to Beth, life at home during Warren's childhood was not ideal. Warren and his siblings had a strained relationship with their father because of his treatment of their mother. When Ruth died of a brain aneurysm at 45, her children were devastated. Warren was a sophomore in college at the time, and he stopped going home after his mother's death. When Warren met Beth five years after his mom died, he was disconnected from his siblings. Her death was something Beth believes he had not really resolved.

When Beth and Warren started dating, she witnessed some of the first discussions the family had about their mother's death. Over Thanksgiving 1980, just months after Warren and Beth had started dating, they invited Warren's four siblings for a visit. "We had this apartment on Packard," Beth said, "and I can remember them all sitting around the living room of that apartment, and it was as if they had never talked to each other in all the years since their mom died. . . . It was as if a floodgate opened." The five siblings talked it all out—their mother's death, their problems with their dad, and so much more. Beth thought the time was right:

> It was almost as if they slowly evolved toward remembering their mom. Like they couldn't remember her right away, you know what I mean? And like, that five years later, okay, now it's not painful enough that we can sit around talking about Mom and Dad and everything. But it's almost as if they hadn't been able to do that before.

The opening-up of his family—the open discourse and the opening of their relationship—made Beth feel welcomed into Warren's family. She felt that


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Warren's family was expressing trust in her, by discussing these things in her presence, and she also felt welcomed and included in these deep discussions about their difficulties and loss. For Beth, participating in this discussion with Warren's family deepened her connection to Warren.

Beth's first encounter with Chaldean American food was when Warren's aunt, Rose, started hosting family reunions. Beth cannot remember when the reunions started, but Rose always hosted the party at her house in the summer, and made a Chaldean feast with her sisters. She set up a buffet with an array of Chaldean foods: "There was a little porch where they had all the food. And I'm pretty sure your dad like, hand-held me through the line and made me, you know, this is this, this is this, you know." Beth does not remember whether she liked certain dishes over others, though admits that Yuppra, a Chaldean version of stuffed grape leaves, seemed at least familiar since she had had the Greek counterpart. "I really don't have a good idea of when I first tried that food," Beth commented, "but it was all colored by the fact that for Dad, it was the greatest thing in the world."

Soon after Rose started having these reunions, Warren's family began engaging more with Chaldean foodways. Everyone came to the reunions, even eventually Warren's father, who loved Chaldean ethnic food, despite having a complicated relationship with his wife's Chaldean family. His presence led Warren and his siblings to make amends with their father. Eventually, Warren's sister Carol began gathering with Rose and some of her other aunts and cousins to make Kaletcha, a walnut-stuffed Chaldean Christmas cookie. She gave the cookies as gifts to her siblings, and the next year, Warren asked to participate because he wanted to have more Kaletcha to eat than he could expect to be given. Soon, the rest of his siblings were involved. Once my siblings, cousins, and I were old enough, Warren and his siblings organized an annual Kaletcha Day where we would make dozens and dozens of cookies in an assembly line. Soon, Chaldean foodways were the way all of us connected with our Chaldean side of the family, and how Warren and his siblings started to heal from the loss of their mother. Beth explains:

> It was this special memory of their mom, and it became the way that they—you know, they talked about their mom when they



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> were doing it, they talked about the favorite foods that she made, they talked about how to make ‘em, and what made ‘em special, you know—what’s that spice, you know, that kind of stuff?

Eventually, the time spent cooking these dishes became food events that linked the family to our heritage. Trying to understand this part of my family, I began to urge my father to make Chaldean dishes with me. When I did a report on Iraq in the eighth grade, we made Meat Bread, a hamburger-and-onions-stuffed bread folded into a triangle pocket, and Yuppra. For my high school graduation party we made hundreds of Yuppra and Meat Bread, and Hummoth Kibbeh. This was a way for me to connect to my father, and to my Chaldean heritage.

In these moments, Beth would sometimes assist us in making these foods, but she always took a back seat. Over the years, Beth stopped participating in our annual Kaletcha Day, largely because she was allergic to my aunt Carol’s cats and couldn’t comfortably participate. When we made Chaldean food at home, Beth rarely participated—it was typically my father and me, even though Beth was typically home when we were cooking. Beth says she was not uninterested in Chaldean food—she found the process fascinating and the food delicious—but she often sat out to allow my father time to bond with me and the rest of his family. Still, choosing to take on a Chaldean dish after so many years on the sidelines complicates Beth’s motives. By examining Beth’s performance in the kitchen, and her reflections on making Hummoth Kibbeh, it became clear that understanding Beth’s motivation relies on knowing her and Warren’s background and relationship.

## Observation and Methodology: The Cooking and Interviewing Process

Over Thanksgiving 2015, I asked Beth if she would consider making Hummoth Kibbeh while I observed and documented the process. Beth was delighted by the idea, because she knew we would have dinner and lunch to eat for a while if she made the dish around the holiday. On November 25, 2015, I assisted Beth in making Hummoth Kibbeh, while also documenting the experience using photography and audio recording.


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Making Hummoth Kibbeh can be divided into two main phases. In the first phase, the cook makes the meatballs. The meatballs themselves, called “kibbeh,” are actually stuffed meatballs. Traditionally, the name “kibbeh” is given to dishes of varying shapes and sizes that are made with a mixture of bulgur or another grain with meat or another shell (often potato is used instead of meat, or the shell is made entirely of the main grain) (Strum 2013). These shells are then stuffed with something—almost always a meat (Strum 2013). Our kibbeh are meatballs that have an outer shell made of ground beef mixed with cream of rice cereal, which is then stuffed with pre-cooked ground beef and onions—a mixture we call “hushu”—and rounded into balls. These meatballs are then cooked directly in the broth of the soup, which consists of tomato paste, water, celery stalks and leaves, lemon juice, and mint that has been fried in butter. The broth cooks the meatballs, and often thickens as the cream of rice dissolves into the broth.

To prepare the kibbeh, Beth asked me to cut an onion while she measured out the meat. We chose to make a half batch of meatballs—we ended up with about 24 total—so we had to adjust the measurements of the recipe as we went. I fried the onion in a large pan. Once the onion was browned, Beth added about one pound of hamburger to the pan. While the hamburger and onions were cooking, she measured the amount of cream of rice to add into the remaining raw hamburger to create the shell dough. (Photo 1) She paused at this step and seemed unsure how much cream of rice to add. We adjusted the measurements for the amount of hamburger we had left—two pounds of hamburger to “one package” of cream of rice would make a full batch of dough; since we did not know how much “one package” of cream of rice was, and had to halve the recipe anyway, we attempted to calculate—but Beth remained uncertain: “You can tell by feel, though, right? If it’s too dry. . . . I think you just do it by feel—it doesn’t tell you how much,” she said, “my recollection is you want it stiffer than you think so you can handle it.”



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**Photo 1.** Beth measuring cream of rice cereal to mix into ground beef for the Kibbeh shells. November 2015. Photo: Christine Widmayer.

Beth carefully poured some of the cream of rice into the bowl of raw hamburger and kneaded it to mix it together.

> "You know, I've only just made this one time!" She exclaimed, frustrated at not knowing the exact measurements.
>
> "I know. And the only other time we've made this was with Dad. With Dad overseeing it," I said.
>
> "Yeah, with Dad telling us, 'Oh, oh no, that's not enough,' or Dad mixing it himself, right?" she confirmed. She asked me to check the dough and deferred back to her.
>
> "I think this is good," she said. (She used about seven ounces of cream of rice in the end.) (Photo 2)


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**Photo 2.** "I think you can just do it by feel." Beth kneads the cream of rice cereal into the ground beef. November 2015. Photo: Christine Widmayer.

After the dough was prepared, we returned to the hushu, which was still cooking on the stove. (Photo 3) Now browned, the hamburger needed to be split up a little more. "I guess it's really important to get as finely minced hamburger as you can because that makes it a lot easier to fill the little things with," Beth said, referring to the meatball shell.

**Photo 3.** The filling for the Kibbeh is pre-cooked onions and ground beef—a


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mixture called "hushu." November 2015. Photo: Christine Widmayer.

We drained the hushu in a strainer to remove the fat, and put it in a bowl. We gathered plates on which we would stack the finished meatballs, two placemats, the bowl of hushu, and two spoons, and we sat down at the dining room table to shape the meatballs.

When we sat down to make the meatballs—a process that requires time, but little concentration—I asked Beth questions about her previous encounters with Chaldean food. While we were talking, we started shaping and filling the meatballs. We each took a ball of shell dough a little smaller than a golf ball and formed it into a small cup. Beth placed the ball on her palm, and pinched around it until it was sitting in her hand like a cup. (Photo 4) We then filled the cups with hushu, and each of us pinched the tops of our cups closed, then rerolled the balls so they were round. (Photos 5-7) We continued chatting and making meatballs until we realized we did not have enough shell dough. Beth got up and retrieved more hamburger from the refrigerator. She mixed the dough without comment, and returned to the table. When I asked her what makes a good kibbeh, she replied:

> I always start out thinking I have to make this flat pancake-y thing, and then I realize—Oh no, you know, there's nowhere to put the meat. So it's really like making this little cup. And then the important thing is not over-stuffing it so you can close it. But sometimes what happens to me—I just smash it all together and hope it seals. (Photo 8)


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**Photo 4.** Beth pinches the shell dough into a cup to fill with hushu—ground beef and onion filling. November 2015. Photo: Christine Widmayer.

**Photo 5.** Beth fills the shell with hushu. November 2015. Photo: Christine Widmayer.


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**Photo 6.** Pinching the shell closed is a difficult step. November 2015. Photo: Christine Widmayer.

**Photo 7.** After the Kibbeh is closed, Beth reshapes the meatball so it remains round. November 2015. Photo: Christine Widmayer.



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**Photo 8.** A plate of Kibbeh ready to be cooked.
November 2015. Photo: Christine Widmayer.

We soon finished the remaining meatballs, and started the second phase of cooking. Beth set me to chopping three celery stalks (leaves included) while she minced two cloves garlic—garlic is her own adaptation to the recipe, which she "got permission" from Warren to put in the broth. (Photo 9) We started heating a big pot, and Beth sautéed the garlic briefly in a small amount of olive oil before adding water. Once the water was boiling, we added the celery and a large can of tomato paste. Beth mixed this until the tomato paste separated, and let the water come to a boil. (Photo 12) She added a tablespoon of salt. Then, she added a small can of fire-roasted tomatoes, another addition that is a deviation from the traditional recipe.

While the broth came to a boil again we melted two tablespoons butter in a small saucepan and then added six tablespoons of dried spearmint. (Photo 10) The spearmint, Beth was careful to tell me, must be rubbed between the palms or fingers as it is added to the butter so that it releases all its flavor. (Photo 11) Beth stirred the mint, which was frying in the butter, with a wooden spatula, and let it fry for a few minutes. Once it was fried, she transferred it to a bowl and put the meatballs in the broth. (Photo 13) After a few minutes, once the broth was boiling again, she added the butter-mint mixture and juiced a lemon into the pot. The broth continued to boil, and about an hour later, she declared the Hummoth Kibbeh finished, and ladled herself a bowl. (Photo 14)


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**Photo 9.** One of Beth's additions to the recipe was minced garlic. November 2015. Photo: Christine Widmayer.

**Photo 10.** Beth precisely measures the mint for the broth, which is then fried in butter. November 2015. Photo: Christine Widmayer.



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**Photo 11.** Beth crushes mint between her palms to "release the oils" as she adds the mint into butter. November 2015. Photo: Christine Widmayer.

**Photo 12.** Beth stirs the broth, a mixture of water, tomato paste, lemon juice, minced garlic, celery stalks and leaves, tomato paste, mint fried in butter, and fire roasted tomatoes. November 2015. Photo: Christine Widmayer.



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**Photo 13.** The meatballs cook in the broth for at least 15 minutes before the shell is cooked through. November 2015. Photo: Christine Widmayer.

**Photo 14.** The finished product. (Some of the meatballs burst when cooking.) November 2015. Photo: Christine Widmayer.

Two days after we cooked the Hummoth Kibbeh, I sat down with Beth for a formal interview. As we conversed comfortably in the living room, I asked her


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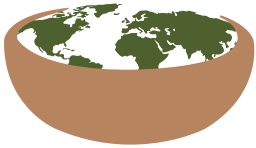



questions about when she started cooking, what she understood about being Chaldean when she met my dad, and what this particular set of food traditions meant to her. We discussed her relationship with Warren, and explored her understandings of his family background. When I called Beth on the phone a few weeks after this interview to follow up on a few points that were not clear from the initial interview—specifically about her role as the main cook in the household—it became clear how significant Beth and Warren's relationship and gender roles were to understanding Beth's decisions to make this dish.

## "It's Just a Dish": Power Dynamics and Gender Roles

This instance of Beth cooking Hummoth Kibbeh demonstrates several similarities to and inversions of Beth's typical cooking experience, or at least how she represented it in our interviews. While she maintained a certain level of adaptability, she appeared to me to have lost her cooking confidence when she approached Warren's Chaldean dish. I suspect that these changes in performance illustrate the shift that occurs in the power dynamics between Beth and Warren when Chaldean food is involved. When it comes to everyday foods, Beth ostensibly holds all the power—she decides what the family eats for dinner and prepares the food, making several choices along the way with confidence and surety. Warren, on the other hand, shows up each night not knowing what food he will be eating for dinner. If Beth were not cooking for him, Warren would be limited in his own cooking—despite being a good cook—because of his strict adherence to recipes and lack of time and comfort in the kitchen. On the face of things, Beth is a more powerful cook because of her experience and creativity. However, this superficial appearance of power only skims the surface of the dynamics at play here. By looking closely at Beth's performance in the kitchen, and her understanding of her role, it is clear that she actually holds much less power than it seems.


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## The Power of Satisfaction and Reward

Part of Beth's power comes from the satisfaction and reward of knowing a skill and doing it well. Beth expressed how, in her childhood, cooking was the only thing she had confidence in. This satisfaction was its own reward: confidence feels good. However, in her relationship with Warren, this sense of reward is undermined by the traditional gender roles at play. Though Beth holds power in the kitchen, as a feminist and liberal she said she sometimes "resents" being required to cook as a duty. "I like cooking because I know what I'm doing," she said, but she continued, "I feel like I've mastered cooking, and it hasn't got a lot to offer me anymore." This ambivalence toward cooking comes a long way from the satisfaction she found in her cooking competence. Because she cooks so regularly, it has become a chore. Thomas Adler argues that this division of labor is typical in the American household when gender roles are divided so that the man works and woman stays home: "To the wife who cooks regularly, food preparation is a task to be completed" (1981: 47). This kind of position removes some of the power from cooking, especially in relation to a husband or partner who rarely cooks. For the woman's role, her labor in the kitchen is less recognized and lacks power, whereas the man's labor, both in and outside of the kitchen, is elevated.

In the case of Beth and Warren, this division is quite pronounced. Warren, an occasional cook, is "exalted" (Adler 1981: 47) in his cooking. His cooking becomes celebrated and celebratory. Even Beth would celebrate the littlest concession on Warren's part in division of the cooking labor. When she visited her brother a few years ago, Beth felt "very envious" when he declared that he was going to make dinner:

> He was like, 'Oh, it's my night to cook.' So he was making, pork fried rice. And this was some specialty of



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> his. He had the recipe card all typed out, and he was very methodically following this recipe. I was incredibly jealous. Because, you know, I would—I wish—because your dad's a fabulous cook. But I can't rely on him. But I wish that Wednesdays were his days to cook. Or Fridays, or whatever it was. But I can't rely on that, 'cause I'll maybe starve if I'm waiting for him to cook.

This anecdote demonstrates much of Beth's attitude toward Warren's cooking. Beth's brother is represented as a cook very similar to Warren—he has a typed out recipe that he "very methodically" follows. Beth sees in her brother what she wishes she would see from Warren—even the smallest gesture that he would be willing to share the cooking load would help her feel less burdened. She acknowledges that Warren is a "fabulous" cook but then expresses that she does not think she can "rely on" him: to make the time, or perhaps to take the habit seriously. Her mention that she might "starve" while waiting for him to cook could apply both to the actual length of time it takes him to complete a dish, and to Warren's late work hours and problematic schedule. Either way, Beth indicates that to ask Warren to take on an evening meal is outside the realm of what she thinks he would reasonably do.

Compared to Beth's dissatisfaction with cooking as an obligation, Warren, on the other hand, can swoop in occasionally to make his special dishes, and be treated like a king for making a smaller contribution to the household culinary work. Warren's role as an occasional male cook conforms thus with Adler's association of festivity and novelty with the male cooking event. Whereas the woman's weekday food preparation can be characterized as ordinary or "ferial," when the man takes over (often for weekend meals), the meal feels more "festal" (Adler 1981: 47). When Warren cooks now, the stakes are often higher. That he so rarely cooks, or he cooks a special dish, Chaldean or not, that is particularly recognized as "his" heightens the cooking experience


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and provides greater satisfaction for a meal well made. Warren ostensibly thus gets satisfaction from several levels of the cooking—that he is cooking at all and that he is cooking a Chaldean dish elevates his own, and the family's, excitement.

Beth, however, gets no extra buzz from cooking Chaldean foods. "He's got an emotional attachment to them that I don't have," Beth says. She continues, speaking specifically about Hummoth Kibbeh: "I don't have that attachment to it. It's just a recipe to me, you know, it's just a dish—that can be improved upon and changed and made into my own." While she respects Warren's ethnic connections to the dish, it is still "just" a dish, she says. Other than its good taste, what does she gain from making it herself? The answer to this question relates to the complicated culinary choices Beth makes every day.

## The Power of Food Choice

Since Beth is the main cook in the household, she decides what she and Warren eat each day. Beth does the shopping, Beth does the food preparation, and Beth makes a choice, each night, what to put on the table. However, that is a gross oversimplification of Beth's process when choosing foods to make. It is clear from talking to Beth that her love for and support of Warren often influences her choices, as does the time he comes home from work. Beth knows what Warren likes, and she often chooses to feed him foods that make him happy. Similarly, Warren is somewhat of a health nut and regulates the amount of protein versus carbohydrates he puts into his body. Beth feels required to defer to these food preferences because she wants to take care of him, resembling similar trends of women deferring to their husbands' preferences that Michael Owen Jones discusses in "Food Choice, Symbolism and Identity." Jones cites several examples of women giving their husbands more than an equal portion of the food, or picking traditionally masculine


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dishes or ingredients—meat and potatoes, for instance (Jones 2007: 142). In Beth's case, she chooses foods that fit Warren's health needs, as well as his food likes and dislikes. Jones also considers Mary Douglas's discussion of what is considered a "meal" in terms of how a husband's expectations influence wives into choosing particular foods, implicitly or explicitly (Jones 2007: 142). Douglas argues that conceptions of "meals" are socially formed in small groups and society (1972: 61). She points to how "small-scale social relations" codify food beliefs and practice, including everything from frequency of meals, portion sizes, ingredients, and positioning on a plate (Douglas 1972: 61). In the case of Beth and Warren, their meals are codified by understandings of food preferences and also time restrictions due to Warren's work schedule.

Beth describes, for instance, a new practice of cooking breakfast for Warren in the morning:

> I make him breakfast in the morning. I didn't always do that, but you know, lately I've been feeling guilty about, you know, sending him off into the world with nothing to eat. You know, it's his choice that he doesn't eat oatmeal, or toast, he's all, "Oh no, I need to have a protein or something." You know, but, so I kowtow to that and I make it for him because I love him and I want him to have a good—it's important to have a meal. . . . I take care of him because he doesn't take care of himself.

Here Beth demonstrates several facets of how Warren's food preference affects her food choices. First of all, she admits her guilt that she is "sending him off into the world" without a good meal, a feeling directly related to her role as wife (and often caretaker) to her husband. Almost immediately, however, she backtracks and comments on his food limitations—"it's his choice he doesn't eat oatmeal or toast"—demonstrating an internal debate about enabling his food preferences. This



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internal debate—the wish for him to have a good meal, and the recognition that not getting a meal is not her fault—shows how Beth's resentment toward being Warren's personal chef wars with her caring nature. Her use of the word "kowtow" later also demonstrates her recognition of her subservience—she knows that she is not in control when his food choices and limitations battle against her love for him. Finally, she reasserts a sense of duty to Warren—"I take care of him because he doesn't take care of himself." While this could be construed as a positive caring relationship, it could also indicate Beth's resentment that she has to "take care" of a grown man.

Beth also experiences limitations on food choice based on when Warren comes home to eat. Since he works until 8:00pm or 9:00pm every night, Beth finds it difficult to schedule a meal so that she is not eating directly before bed: "So I've started trying to figure out things that I can make ahead of time that I'll eat, and then he can just heat up, or it's still on the stove, or whatever, like stews and soups and things that are not like chicken piccata, you're going to put it on the table right after you do it. I think that's always been a struggle." Beth describes this as one of her main motivations behind trying Hummoth Kibbeh herself—it's a dish she knows Warren loves, and also a dish she can leave on the stove for hours until Warren comes home. These practical considerations—keeping the peace by providing foods he likes, and foods that make her role easier on herself—allow Beth and Warren to compromise over food choices. Beth sacrifices some of the power of food choice to Warren's preferences, but in doing so, gains more freedom to do what works for her.

When it comes to her choice to make Hummoth Kibbeh, however, Beth seems to be most motivated by her desire to express her love for Warren through cooking. She describes Hummoth Kibbeh as "comfort food" and says, "It is something I do because I know it's one of his favorite meals. . . . I wanted to make something special that he loves." This gesture of



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love goes beyond the typical food preference. While it is obvious that Warren loves this dish, Beth's motivation is not based on what product she is giving him, but rather the expression that the process demonstrates. For Beth, performing Chaldean foodways is not an expression of extended family identity, but rather a demonstration of love and marital identity. Considering Beth's change in confidence and comfort when she cooks Hummoth Kibbeh, this gesture is a symbol of the strength of Beth's affection.

## Power in Performance: Confidence and Adaptability

Watching Beth cook Hummoth Kibbeh was an interesting experience because Beth transformed from the confident, adaptable cook that she describes herself as into an insecure, much more recipe-bound cook. From the very start, Beth was unsure of whether she was following the recipe correctly. While I chopped, she pulled out all the hamburger meat we had in the refrigerator to see how much we had and how much we needed. While I was chopping, she chose to make a half batch of the meatballs, and she carefully weighed the hamburger meat on her kitchen scale. We did math out loud to determine what ratio should be used in converting the other ingredients. Beth seemed to want to measure everything precisely.

This insecurity became clearest when Beth had a crisis of confidence over measurements for the cream of rice cereal. We spent a while trying to figure out how much to add before Beth decided to do it by feel. It was at that point that she burst out with, "You know, I've only just made this one time!" This moment while cooking was the first time I realized she was nervous about making the Hummoth Kibbeh. She had told me when she made it alone the first time that she was nervous, but seeing her have such anxiety when adding the cream of rice was surprising. This could also indicate her inexperience in cooking this dish, but



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even when making something new, Beth often demonstrates confidence in her knowledge and ability. I didn't see that here.

All of Beth's nervousness seemed to surround the making of the meatball dough and shaping the meatballs. This fear was clear in her reflections on cooking. "When I made it alone that time," she said, "it was a little intimidating. You know, I was like, 'am I even doing it right?'" This insecurity is, in part, because she does not have much experience or frequent practice in making the meatballs: "It's almost like every time since I don't do it all the time, you have to learn again how to make that little cup to put the hushu in," she said. Since she lacks practice, she also lacks technique. She commented regularly on how she wished she "had the confidence" to make the meatballs' shells thin. These reflections, and her performance in the kitchen, demonstrate the reversal of her typical confidence when cooking.

Similarly, Beth was insecure about the measurements for the broth, especially when it came to adding the mint. When she added the mint, she used a tablespoon to measure out the four to six tablespoons of mint required. I rarely see Beth use tablespoons with spices—she often measures them in her palm to eyeball the amount. I asked her, as she was adding the mint, if she typically uses measuring implements:

> "Well, it depends on what I'm cooking," she said.
>
> "Do you feel like it has to be really particular for this recipe?" I asked.
>
> "I do. I mean, I was thinking about just pouring that whole bag in there!"
>
> "Why do you feel like it's more particular for this one?" I asked.



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> "Because it's your dad's special thing. It's not my thing. If it was, you know, my crab cakes, those are mine. I know how to make those. I could do that just totally by eyeball," Beth replied.

Here, it is clear that part of her stress about adding the correct measurements of the ingredients has to do with the fact that she considers this Warren's dish. It is his "special thing" and not hers. The assertion of Warren's ownership diminishes her confidence in her ability.

Adler discusses that "once a recipe has been staked out as the man's exclusive territory, he may go so far as to assert that it cannot be properly cooked by anyone else" (Adler 1981: 47). Though Warren never told Beth that she cannot cook Hummoth Kibbeh, she has obviously responded to his ownership of the dish territorially—she knows she is encroaching on Warren's territory, and proceeds with caution, hoping to make it as good as when he makes it himself. Her lack of confidence comes from the fact that this dish is in Warren's tradition, not her own.

This aspect of "ownership" in the dish comes to a head when Beth considers making adjustments to the recipe. When she first made Hummoth Kibbeh by herself, she followed the recipe exactly—another inversion of Beth's typical cooking performance. Beth would almost always adapt a dish by adding some new flavor or ingredient that she thought would improve it. "I've always done this with recipes," she said:

> I feel free to do that about everything except for Hummoth Kibbeh—my thought when I started making it was, 'Well, this needs garlic,' you know? I had to *get his permission*. He was actually very—you know, obviously he's mellowed with age—'Oh, yeah, you're right. Probably, yeah! Oh, put tomatoes in it. Oh, sure!' But at first, I was afraid to even bring it up, 'cause it's kind of this sacred recipe. And he's always kind


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> of had this thing about, he had to have the recipe. I'm afraid that somehow it won't pass the, you know, whatever Warren's, you know, ideal recipe is. Somehow it won't be as good for him. That's how I feel.

Here, Beth emphasizes needing Warren's "permission" before she changes anything, and her surprise at his willingness to change the dish at all, saying he "mellowed with age." She calls the recipe "sacred," and worries about it living up to Warren's "ideal recipe." Together, these phrases clarify the level of ownership she feels Warren has over the dish, and how she must again kowtow to his beliefs about the dish.

Notably, Beth is imposing these restrictions on herself, just as she does when allowing Warren's food preferences to take precedence. She worries that Warren has an "ideal" in his head that she cannot achieve, and reveals her perspective toward the Chaldean food traditions. She seems to believe she cannot possibly reach the level of authenticity she hopes to reach with these dishes, perhaps because she does not consider herself Chaldean. Beth knows that by entering into Chaldean food traditions, she is entering into a typically in-group practice. The pressure she feels to produce an authentic Chaldean dish that is respectful of these traditions causes Beth to see Chaldean dishes as "sacred." However, Warren has never forbid Beth from her participation in these Chaldean foodways and has, in fact, encouraged her adaptations to Hummoth Kibbeh.

Warren's flexibility in this moment highlights again that inversion of the typical power dynamic between Warren and Beth in the kitchen. This, along with Beth's discomfort with the "sacred" nature of the dish, and her compliance with the recipe, except for the agreed-upon additions, tell me that for Beth, Hummoth Kibbeh is not "just a dish" as she claims. Instead, it is a dish that undermines many of the power dynamics and gender roles Beth is used to. By



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making Hummoth Kibbeh, Beth is upsetting the norm.

However, some of that normal balance was regained when Beth made her additions to the pot when we were cooking. The few times Beth was truly and visibly confident in the dish was when she added new ingredients—garlic and fire-roasted tomatoes. Instead of consulting the recipe, or debating when to add these new ingredients, Beth just did it. I found out later that Beth considers these adaptations to be significant moments in a recipe:

> One of the things we found out, I don't know where in our cooking experience, we found out that—a recipe becomes your own when you change an ingredient. I think it was like a Martha Stewart thing, or something. Somewhere somebody was explaining what makes a proprietary recipe your own, you change—well, I added garlic. Therefore, it's my recipe now. It's not his Hummoth Kibbeh.

This transformative moment—the moment Beth adapts the Hummoth Kibbeh—is the moment it becomes *hers*. Beth's main issue with Hummoth Kibbeh seemed to be her lack of ownership over the recipe. But now, after Beth was allowed to adapt the dish, she is calling it her own—the dish has gone from being a dish of cultural in-group identity representing Warren's Chaldean heritage to being Beth's dish, a dish of personal identity and artistry.

I wonder if part of Beth's efforts in cooking Hummoth Kibbeh was to make it her own—to find a way to adapt this special tradition into her own thing. I came into this project wondering whether she felt she was taking on Warren's identity, or connecting to our Chaldean past in a compelling way. Beth did admit some envy for our Chaldean traditions, and her inability to be Chaldean, while she's surrounded by Chaldeans, seemed to affect her: "I have always felt kind of weird about that because like, during the Iraq war, when you guys were wearing those


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buttons that said, 'This is what an Iraqi looks like,' I was a little jealous, you know. Because I can never be there. You know?" However, she reiterated in the very next sentence: "I feel like I'm doing something nice for him, as part of his tradition."

By taking on this Chaldean dish, Beth's real purpose here is to express her love and appreciation for Warren in a language he recognizes, a symbol he will understand —through his maternal family's comfort food traditions. Beth's conversance with Warren's Chaldean foods and their significance—the echoes of Warren's mother's love, the reminder of his supportive family—all these reverberations are born from performances of Chaldean dishes. They are comfort foods because they remind Warren of a loving, supportive family. And Beth has chosen to do something nice for him in his present nuclear family, to express her love for him, through this traditional symbol. If, in the end, Beth also takes some comfort from making a Chaldean dish something of hers, taking a little bit of that comfort into herself, then that makes this dish even more successful.

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