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## Article

# Cooking Across Cultures: Everyday Food Provisioning in Multicultural Almere

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**Abstract:** Food from home can increase feelings of belonging and act as a source of comfort for people who move to another country and their children. Nevertheless, people who move elsewhere often start taking over dietary elements of the host culture, a dynamic process referred to as food acculturation. This paper argues that this process is not only related to identity negotiations and emotional connections, but that food choices are also shaped by everyday practical realities. Using a social practice theory-inspired approach, focusing on the elements of material, competence, and meaning, this study investigates the food provisioning practices of eighteen people with a migration background through semi-structured interviews. The study's findings show that procuring typical ingredients from one's home country is relatively easy in the study area of Almere, the Netherlands. Cooking skills, however, are more difficult to maintain and transfer to the next generation. Finally, the meaning of eating foods from home lies in connecting these foods to celebrations and get-togethers. In regular day-to-day meals, respondents often opt for more convenient dishes, either from their root cuisine or from Dutch or other food cultures. The paper concludes that respondents' eating patterns balance cultural traditions with practical constraints of modern life, as people navigate their food routines while making practical choices that align with their daily routines and social environments. Municipalities, social services, and community initiatives could direct more attention to celebrating the culinary heritage that connects people from diverse migration backgrounds by organizing exchanges and get-togethers and fostering culturally appropriate food environments.



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**Keywords:** migration; acculturation; food environment; procuring; cooking; eating; social practice theory

## 1. Introduction

In a globalizing world, an increasing number of people are not living in the country where they were born [1]. In the Netherlands, the country of our focus, more than a quarter of the population has a migration background, defined by the Dutch Bureau of Statistics as at least one parent being born abroad [2]. For people who move away from their home country, food can play an important role, as it can serve as a source of comfort [3,4] and increase feelings of belonging in the host country [5]. Nevertheless, food habits and preferences do tend to change when people move countries [6]. As they enter new food environments, they develop new food routines and start shopping, cooking, and eating differently [7]. Such changes can be induced by an (initial) lack of availability of ingredients or cooking tools, but also by migrants adjusting their eating habits to local social norms [8], like eating sandwiches for lunch rather than consuming a cooked meal.

The process in which people from a minority group encounter and take over elements of the eating pattern or food preferences of the host country is generally referred to as (food) acculturation [8–10]. Rather than a simple blending of cuisines, food acculturation is a complex negotiation of multiple cultural and identity factors [11]. As the term potentially oversimplifies such complex identity negotiations (e.g., [12]), it is important to maintain that acculturation is dynamic and multifaceted: it is influenced by various factors, such as social class, income, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, and age [13]. Moreover, immigrants and the food environment form a bidirectional relationship [6], implying that the food environment also changes in response to the influx of newcomers. What we would like to add to this understanding of acculturation is that in daily life, people often make pragmatic decisions as they balance the maintenance of cultural identity with the practicalities and realities of living in a new environment [7,14].

In other words, while the role of food in fostering feelings of belonging, community, and ethnic identity should not be underestimated, it is also important to realize that food choices are shaped by everyday routines: they are part of a larger social fabric, involving everyday negotiations between cultural preservation and pragmatic adaptation. Hence, while the dynamic interplay between food preferences and habits in the home country and food preferences and habits in the host country reflects a complex process of acculturation, where cultural identity is negotiated through food choices and practices, food patterns do not only change because of such identity negotiations but also because of the practicalities of everyday life. In this paper, we take a practice–theoretical approach to better understand this complex process: our aim is to explore how everyday life influences processes of food acculturation. We explore the food provisioning practices of eighteen people with a migration background in the medium-sized Dutch city of Almere, focusing on the role and value of foods from the home country amidst a changing food environment and an increasing integration in the host society. Unraveling the specific practices of (1) procuring, (2) cooking, and (3) eating, our work highlights how cultural traditions are both maintained and transformed, underscoring the adaptability required to navigate the demands of modern life.

## 2. Theoretical Framing

### 2.1. Food and Belonging

The literature discusses four main ways in which food can create feelings of belonging. First, seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting food from home can evoke emotions and memories from the past [3,4,15]. The smells and flavors of the home cuisine serve as a reminder of one's place of origin, offering a sense of comfort and continuity [16]. Especially home-cooked dishes can offer recognizable flavors and appear to play a central role in one's cultural identity [17]. Delving into how food memories shape personal narratives, Abarca and Colby [18] emphasize how the recounting of food experiences integrates sensory and emotional elements into cultural identities, confirming that food is a vehicle to bring back memory and induce storytelling.

Second, the activity of cooking traditional foods can foster belonging and preserve cultural identity [19–21]. In her work on first-generation Dominican immigrant women in New York, Marte [22] argues that “the actual work of cooking (. . .) helps migrant women produce a new sense of place and belonging in NYC” (p. 288). The process of choosing what to buy and prepare, and where to spend one's money, time, and energy, is not only empowering but also helps the women adapt to their new ways of life. Cooking therefore “functions emotionally, semiotically, and politically as an archive through which to leave traces of histories that do not have other ways of being preserved or shared” ([22], p. 300).

Third, dietary choices can signify people's cultural identities to themselves and others [23], also fostering belonging. Food can connect individuals to their ethnic background and create feelings of community [16,17]. Communal dining with family and friends, for instance, has been found to be of great importance [14]. Shared meals not only remind individuals of their culinary culture but also help pass down norms and values related to food preparation and consumption, which are then recognized in others with the same cultural background, resulting in a sense of belonging [16].

Fourth and finally, the presentation and sales of food can create a sense of home. Coakley [3] found that in Polish shops in Ireland, familiar tastes, scents, and visual elements trigger nostalgic memories, making people feel at home. Similarly, Huizinga and van Hoven [5] observe that Turkish supermarkets and Islamic stores provide a welcoming atmosphere for Syrian immigrants, contrasting their experienced sense of exclusion in other public spaces. This is confirmed by Bailey [16], who argues that Indian food shops enhance the self-identity of Indian immigrants. Moreover, the presence of "foreign" food in public spaces, through stores and restaurants, reduces the dislocation experienced by newly arrived migrants and signifies acceptance of their cultural norms and lifestyles [16]. Ethnically diverse food environments thus allow migrants to express their cultural identity and to feel that they belong.

Clearly, food helps people feel at home in a new country and connects people to others in both the host and the home country. At the same time, however, food choices are made within the hustle and bustle of everyday life. They are therefore not only based on cultural preservation and identity negotiation but are also the result of pragmatic adaptations to everyday life in the place where people live. O'Mara et al. [6] found, for instance, that once availability and certain aspects of acceptability, such as culturally appropriate food choices, were met, other factors turned out to play a role in respondents' food decisions. Examples are quality, shelf life, variety, and affordability of the food. Similarly, Rodriguez et al. [21] highlight that immigrants in Ontario, Canada balance issues like food quality, affordability, healthiness, and cultural appropriateness. However, the pragmatic, everyday realities that shape food choices, such as ingredient availability, time constraints, and the demands of modern life [7,14], are often overlooked in the literature. Indeed, research mainly focuses on the symbolic and emotional dimensions of food, such as its role in evoking memories and preserving cultural identity [3,4,16,22]. In this paper, we respond to this gap in the literature, using social practice theory to assist us in unraveling everyday pragmatism.

## 2.2. Social Practice Theory and Everyday Life

Social practice theory (SPT) is located at the intersection of structure and agency. It argues that social order and individual behavior rely on and shape each other. Practices—activities such as cooking, bathing, or reading a book—therefore simultaneously shape and are shaped by a social system, implying that the structural properties of that system are both medium for and outcome of the practices they organize [24]. The performance of practices creates routinized forms of behavior [25] and consequently a routinization of daily life, as people performing practices "routinely enact behaviors in accordance with the prevailing requirements of normality and appropriate conduct" ([26], p. 110). Such routinization is different in different contexts: where in some countries, a cooked lunch is common—so that breaks are long enough to make such lunches possible—in the Netherlands, where most people eat a simple sandwich at lunchtime, breaks are generally shorter. Eating practices should therefore not be seen in isolation: they are situated in the rhythm of daily life, integrating the concepts of agency and social structure [27]. This enables certain forms of eating (e.g., a sandwich for lunch) while making others more difficult (e.g., cooking at lunchtime).

SPT not only observes the role of routines but also that of emotion, embodiment, and desire [28], as it leaves room for agency and choice: people have a range of options in any context. They choose which practices to engage in according to their plans and goals [29]. As carriers of a practice, people are competent practitioners and knowledgeable agents, reflexively monitoring the interaction they have with one another [24] and consciously constructing who they are by choosing which practices to engage in [29]. Also, everyday crises may lead to a breaking and shifting of structures [25]. An example of such an “everyday crisis” is moving to a different country where practices are performed differently. Practices themselves are not static either. They can change when the circumstances under which people perform them change (e.g., when food environments start offering a larger diversity of produce), but also because people always perform practices in slightly different ways [30]. Thus, when the workplace starts to welcome more people who prefer to eat cooked lunches, the idea of what a proper lunch is may change, and microwaves may appear to make such lunches possible. This may then invite others to bring microwaveable lunches too.

SPT uses the change and perseverance of patterns of action as the starting point of analysis, and as such, it “provides a particularly useful framework for studying the relationship between individual dietary choices and collective trends of dietary change” ([20], p. 2). Moreover, practice theory “is particularly attentive to the enactment of social life as the outcome of multiple, interdependent practices” ([31], p. 1288). This is important, because, in the words of Delormier et al. [27], “the most important limitation of studying eating strictly as a behavior under the control of an individual, is that it exaggerates the extent to which rational choice drives what people choose to eat, and underestimates the extent to which eating is embedded in the flow of day-to-day life. People’s eating patterns form in relation to other people, alongside everyday activities that take place in family groups, work and school. Eating does involve isolated choice, but it is choice conditioned by the context in which it occurs” (p. 27). Using SPT as a theoretical approach thus allows us to move beyond individual preferences and instead focus on shared routines and practices that constitute everyday life.

### *2.3. Food Provisioning Practices*

Practices are often considered as existing of various elements, which include things, bodily doings and sayings, as well as the meanings of these doings and sayings [30]. Reckwitz [25] distinguishes “forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge” (p. 249). Practice theorists who aim to empirically study practices often turn to the elements of practices offered by Shove et al. [32]: material (or equipment), competence (or skills) and meaning (or images, sometimes also referred to as motivation). This is also the approach that we are taking.

Trying to understand how people eat and why by using a practice-theoretical approach requires first determining what practice(s) to study. Rule et al.’s [10] approach is to analyze what they call a “domain of practices”, rather than an individual social practice. They argue that practices that form a domain have similar meanings, materials and competences, but that they involve actions that are too diverse to consider them a single practice. The example they give is shopping for food, which can consist of activities like ordering online, going to a supermarket or shopping at an open market. Other writers on food and/or food practices, such as Aronsen Torp et al. [20], refer to the three related activities of shopping, preparing and eating. Using slightly different words, Delormier et al. [27] state that family feeding practices include daily food-related activities such as procuring, preparing and

consuming food, and also House [31] mentions the intersecting practices of shopping, cooking and eating.

In line with these authors, we also focus on procuring (or acquisitioning), cooking (or preparing) and eating (or consuming) practices, but rather than studying each of these practices individually, we place “food provisioning practices” at the center of our analysis. Food provisioning practices can be defined as a range of activities, including food acquisition, preparation, and consumption [33]. Procuring, cooking and eating can therefore be argued to form a domain of practices, which we treat as a unified whole, as illustrated in Figure 1. This means that when analyzing procuring practices, we mainly focus on the material component, as procuring demonstrates the products people want or need to buy. For cooking practices, we emphasize the competence element, as cooking requires specific knowledge and skills. When discussing the eating practices of our participants we reflect on their motivations and experiences, representing the element of meaning. This is not to say that, for instance, cooking does not require material or is not loaded with meaning: understanding food provisioning practices this way is a pragmatic analytical choice.



**Figure 1.** Food provisioning practices.

We acknowledge that this approach is a simplified way of applying SPT. However, we argue that this streamlined approach facilitates a clearer analysis of how each element contributes to the overall practice of food provisioning, allowing us to offer a detailed and organized understanding of the complexity of food routines of our respondents without overwhelming detail. Moreover, although SPT has been applied to understand food provisioning [10,27,31], its potential to unravel the interplay between cultural preservation and pragmatic adaptation in migration contexts remains underexplored. Adopting a practice–theoretical approach to examine food provisioning practices enables us to focus on both pragmatism and cultural negotiation. This advances the theoretical understanding of food acculturation and offers a nuanced perspective on how everyday practices shape food choices.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Research Site

Our empirical work was carried out in Almere, a medium-sized city (around 200,000 inhabitants) in the Netherlands. Almere is culturally diverse: one in five inhabitants was born abroad and 49% of the population has a migration background (Dutch average: around 28%) [2]. This makes Almere a highly suitable location for studies about food behavior and culture.



### 3.2. Interviews and Respondents

This study is based on twelve semi-structured interviews with eighteen respondents with a migration background. The sampling approach aimed to capture a diverse range of perspectives on food practices among individuals with migration backgrounds. Respondents therefore represent different migratory generations: some of them migrated to the Netherlands themselves, others were born in the Netherlands to migrant parents, and one participant is a grandchild of immigrants. Some respondents are married to a Dutch partner, while others have no partner or a partner from another country. Respondents are of different ages. Most interviewees are women.

The respondents represent various countries, although there is an overrepresentation of people with roots in Suriname and Indonesia, and there are no respondents with a Moroccan or Turkish background (while people with such backgrounds form large groups in the Netherlands). Nonetheless, the diversity of generations, ages and household structures (e.g., couples and multi-generational families) allows for a comprehensive exploration of our research questions. While data saturation was not explicitly measured, recurring themes suggested sufficient depth. Interviews focused on how people procure, cook and eat, and how they adapted to a Dutch food environment, or (in the case of children of migrants) how they navigate growing up in different food cultures. Some interviews were with one person, while others involved two or even three respondents from different generations. For instance, a mother and her daughter and an aunt and her nephew were interviewed. The fact that the parents of Melissa Korn, who conducted the interviews, were born in Indonesia generated a sense of recognition in the interviews and created trust and understanding. The interviews lasted between 50 and 120 minutes. Most of them took place at the respondents' homes. See Table A1 for respondent characteristics and familial relationships.

### 3.3. Analysis

Korn conducted the interviews as part of an assignment for Flevo Campus, a research and action institute with which the other authors of this paper frequently cooperate. However, after conducting the interviews, Korn left Flevo Campus without having the time to complete the research assignment. Flevo Campus then asked the other authors to analyze the interviews and finalize a professional report (with the overt consent of Korn). Korn contacted all respondents and received verbal consent for a transfer of the audio files to the research team. She also sent the other authors summaries of the interviews in table form. Upon receiving the dataset, they immediately anonymized it and transcribed the interviews.

To address potential biases and enhance the reliability of the analysis, we employed a dual-analyst approach. Esther Veen and Sara Smaal analyzed the transcripts independently in both an inductive and a deductive manner: main codes were based on the three elements of social practice theory (e.g., material, competence, and meaning, or procuring, cooking, and eating), sub-codes came up while reading and rereading the transcripts. Sub-coding was therefore an iterative process. While Smaal analyzed the transcripts thematically using NVivo software (NVivo 14), Veen conducted a manual analysis by creating analytical summaries for each respondent and comparing these. This dual approach allowed for cross-verification of findings and reduced the risk of individual bias. The authors then shared and discussed their analyses, comparing findings and interpretations.

Veen and Smaal co-authored an initial draft of the professional report as requested by Flevo Campus. This report was checked with Korn, based on her recollection of the interviews. The current paper is based on this professional report—Yassir Sefu was involved

in the writing process. The Ethics Committee from Aeres University of Applied Sciences did not require ethical approval for this study.

#### 4. Results

In general terms, our respondents have mixed diets. They eat both what would be considered Dutch meals and food from their (parents') home countries. This mixture of eating patterns is present throughout the interviews. While traditional meals remain important, the practicalities of modern life, such as time constraints and availability of ingredients, often lead respondents to combine or adapt cuisines. For instance, some incorporate ready-to-use supermarket products or takeaway items to prepare traditional meals. Rice in particular is a staple for most respondents, as Bernadette illustrates: "I do eat differently as well, but eventually I usually go back to rice. That is simply easy. So I am not going to make a pasta or take some chips. Indeed it's mostly rice".

There are major differences between the respondents when it comes to how often they eat meals originating from their home country. Some do so almost every day, whereas others only twice a month. Most participants eat together with the people with whom they form a household, preferably around the table. Interestingly, quite a few participants mention that they have adapted to earlier dinner times than they were used to. Most respondents also eat Dutch foods regularly, such as mashed potatoes with vegetables, though often adapted with added spices or condiments like sambal. Others include dishes from different international cuisines, such as Italian pasta or Chinese takeaways, into their regular meal planning (although arguably some of those dishes, especially pasta, can nowadays be considered part of a standard Dutch diet).

For several interviewees, there is a difference between how they eat on working days and what they prepare for (family) get-togethers and celebratory activities. On working days, daily reality seems to play a more important role: there is not much time and the children do not like all traditional dishes. On those days, respondents cook pastas or something else easy and quick to prepare, including home-country dishes. Special occasions often inspire more elaborate cooking, and usually call for more complex and sophisticated dishes from the home country. That said, respondents are also clearly inspired by Dutch eating customs. Several respondents express that customs from their home countries about what food to eat in what circumstances are no longer followed. In fact, in some cases, people choose to consume other dishes during such get-togethers. Frank, for instance, states that his mother wanted to do some "tabletop grilling" (a Dutch tradition) for Christmas, and the Indonesian sisters Romana and Quirine explain that they sometimes order Chinese food or go to an "all you can eat" restaurant when they eat in a large group.

In sum, while the specifics play out differently for different respondents, the main common denominator is that respondents make use of different cuisines: the Dutch cuisine, the cuisine from the home country, and third cuisines (like the Italian).

##### 4.1. Material: Procuring

The food environment invites specific forms of acquisition, since what one can acquire is influenced by what is available. In Almere, possibilities to buy specific ingredients needed for dishes from the home country are generally good and have improved over the years. Respondents argue that the number of *tokos*<sup>1</sup> has grown, that tokos have improved their product range and that supermarkets have a wider range available as well. Respondents generally visit supermarkets for their main shopping, with more or less frequent visits to tokos. Not surprisingly, therefore, most respondents agree with Charlotte, who states that nowadays, one can find just about anything in Almere and that it is no longer needed to go to other places such as Amsterdam to buy produce. Maria contends:



“I live in the city center and at first there was just the open market for buying *okro garri* for instance, but meanwhile I can think of four tokos here in town where I can get it”.

That said, respondents do sometimes question the quality or the authenticity of the produce available. Fresh ingredients, for instance, do not always taste the same as in people’s home countries. To tackle this perceived lack of quality or authenticity, some of our respondents only buy specific brands of oils, sauces or processed foods such as curry pastes. Jane, for instance, tells her mother during the interview: “I bought your vinegar at the toko because it was in stock again”. Others boycott specific brands they do not like—but not all respondents agree on what does and does not count as authentic. Some argue that in relation to the price, the quality of most produce is fine. Consider this conversation between Anna and her daughter Bernadette. Anna: “The other day, I don’t actually remember where we were, but we were in a hurry and we needed some *atjar*. So I had to quickly run into Xenos [a store] (. . .)”. Bernadette: “Oh indeed, it’s still lying around here somewhere. It was Go-Tan [a brand] I think (. . .)”. Anna: “I did not like it. But [I wanted] it for [my] sandwich (. . .)”. Bernadette: “I thought it wasn’t too bad. I thought, it is kind of okay for that price”.

Finally, despite the general agreement that Almere offers most of what our respondents need, all interviewees mention one or more ingredients that are unavailable to them. They use alternative ways to procure these. Sometimes the solution is to buy ready-made dishes. Maria’s partner, for instance, sometimes travels to Amsterdam to buy her Ghanaian food at a restaurant. Others buy Indonesian noodle dishes at *warungs*<sup>2</sup>. Respondents also order ingredients online, bring them with them after a trip (Kathrin: “Then our bags are really full of stuff”), ask family and friends in their home countries to send parcels, or buy them through informal networks of migrants. Three of our respondents, all of Surinamese descent, grow their own vegetables, as they find store-bought Surinamese vegetables too expensive. Olivia explains: “When you buy it at you-know [supermarket or toko], it is expensive. In the garden I plant it myself, so I do not have to buy it, right?” Some respondents receive specific dishes from friends, such as Quirine, who occasionally obtains homemade sambal from a friend’s mother, who is also Indonesian.

In sum, the formal food environment in Almere enables sourcing most ingredients or dishes that people aim to procure. For those ingredients that cannot be found, people use alternative ways than the supermarket or the toko, including growing and making ingredients, or using informal networks. This implies that considering the food provisioning practice, the material element largely allows provisioning food from the home country, although this may require slightly more creativity than in the home country itself.

#### 4.2. Skills: Cooking

In order to work with this wide range of products, specific knowledge and skills are required. Cooking skills vary greatly between our respondents, however. Some of them love cooking extensively and do so almost every day. They consider cooking a hobby. Nathan shares: “It is relaxation, also because I have a hectic job. When I’m cooking, it’s therapy for me to relax”. However, besides some respondents simply not liking cooking, the constraints of modern life—including balancing work, caregiving, and other responsibilities—are also evident in participants’ reflections. Anna states: “I actually cook very little Indonesian food because I find it too much work”. Apart from this lack of time, respondents share that it is not always easy to cook for a household with many different dietary needs—especially children may not like all dishes, as Charlotte explains: “I accommodate them all. I have four children, believe it or not, and when we all come together, I end up making four to five different dishes. One of them doesn’t like this, so I don’t make it; another doesn’t like that. I accommodate them all, and then there’s—their partners as well, and they’re all Dutch”.

Limited time potentially affects the preservation of traditional culinary skills. Interviews also highlight other reasons that hinder the transfer of these skills. In some cases, it is a case of understanding the value of such skills too late in life. Like other respondents, Halina confides that she relied on their grandmother to cook her specific traditional dishes for a long time, also after she had grown up. When she started realizing that it would be important to learn these cooking skills, it was too late: “It happened with my grandmother, for example: she has been gone for a long time, but she made chicken and by God, I still haven’t met anyone who makes it like that. I really regret that. I think, if only I had paid attention when she was cooking what she put in that chicken. Because I just can’t make that chicken the way she made it”. Luckily, Halina’s mother is still alive: Halina is now turning to her for her cooking education. Others were not given the opportunity to transfer their skills to their children. Paula, who migrated to the Netherlands in the fifties at the age of 17, explains that when she arrived, she immediately learned how to cook Dutch food: she only prepared Dutch dishes for her Dutch husband and later her children. These children—Romana and Quirine, who were present during the interview—therefore only learned how to cook Indonesian food later in life, through friends, the internet, and their families-in-law. Moreover, not all children are interested in learning how to cook, such as Nathan’s son: “[my eldest] doesn’t like it and says, I can’t cook”. Finally, some respondents talk about deliberately not adopting specific customs and skills that are less common or necessary in the Dutch context. An example is home-slaughtering or plucking birds. Other respondents stopped eating specific types of organ meats that are common or festive in their country of origin, but not much eaten in the Netherlands.

Despite the difficulties, most respondents did manage to acquire the cooking skills required to cook dishes from their home countries. Many learned them from family members, whom they observed cooking when they were young. Olivia, for instance, shares: “I watched how she cooked and then I started picking it up. If I found something tasty, [then I learned] that’s how I should prepare it! At a certain point, she gave me free rein in the kitchen. [. . .] I was thirteen or fourteen. She would still stand next to me and say, ‘Grab that for me’, and I would watch how she did it”. Nathan, whose oldest son does not want to learn how to cook, explains that “my youngest can cook, he grew up in the kitchen. He can also make a number of Surinamese dishes, for example a cassava soup, which he likes and which he makes. But also various Creole, Hindustani, Javanese and Chinese dishes”. Other respondents use acquaintances, cookbooks and YouTube to learn how to cook specific dishes. Anna says: “After my mother died, an old lady, a mother from a friend, she really wanted to teach it to everyone but her children didn’t want to [learn]. But I said, I want to. She really liked that so I learned from her too”. Irma states: “She gave me a book, very simple. I still have it, it’s falling apart. This is how I learned the basics—and then I discovered that I’m actually a good cook”.

In sum, much more than procuring practices, cooking practices emphasize the tension between practical realities and maintaining cultural foodways. We did find that most respondents take an active approach to learning how to cook traditional dishes, especially as they anticipate the eventual loss of older family members who have been the primary keepers of these culinary traditions, but this finding accentuates that acquiring these skills requires an active effort and does not come easily. Moreover, not all respondents enjoy cooking, and within the reality of contemporary lifestyles, it can be difficult to keep up the skills needed to maintain these cultural practices<sup>3</sup>.

#### 4.3. *Meaning: Eating*

Finally, we study the senses, memories, and emotions that are stimulated when respondents eat traditional foods. Some of our respondents explain that the food from their

home country is part of their identity. Jane, for instance, highlights this connection: “I’m half-Dutch, half-Filipino, and as you get a bit older—I was talking about this with a Filipino friend, about how proud we are of Filipino food, but especially our food culture, in the sense that everything is very much centered around food, so we love talking about food”. That said, most respondents do not reflect much on identity and its relation to food in our interviews. Conversely, they do talk about how certain products, scents, or dishes bring back memories from their childhood, which they really enjoy. Anna explains: “Memories from my past. Good old times, your youth, acknowledgement, nostalgia”. Charlotte frames it as: “It makes me think of my childhood, when my mother prepared it”. By eating food that they associate with their homeland, people thus maintain ties despite the great distance in space (and time).

Apart from and because of these memories, several interviewees express that dishes from their home countries bring them feelings of solidarity and togetherness and provide warmth. Maria, for instance, states: “It’s just the smell and literally the warm feeling—That makes me happy”. This warmth is anchored in food culture: commensality is (perceived to be) vital to most respondents’ cultures. Interviewees clarify that specific dishes have specific meaning because they are usually eaten during special occasions such as holidays, festivities or life events. Bernadette expresses: “When it’s my birthday I always have rice, rendang and our *ajam roedjak* for my friends”. While there are specific dishes that are suitable for specific events (such as food that is served during a funeral or when a girl gets her first period), most respondents argue that the dishes prepared for such events are chosen simply because there is something “festive” about them (Gaby states, for example: “*Nasi kuning* is really a celebratory dish”), or because they are easy to prepare for large groups: the events often bring many people together.

Interviewees oppose the central role that food has in their culture to Dutch eating culture. Irma and Jane conclude, for instance, that while Dutch food is not bad, Dutch people eat to survive while Filipinos eat for commensality. Jane states: “I don’t think that there is a difference between a birthday or just being together with a few people, because it’s just always ‘all out’”. Olivia simply says: “Surinamese people like eating”, and Maria explains that in Ghanaian culture, “everything is celebrated with food”. Gaby, finally, contends: “When I think about Indonesian people, then I think—besides food, I mean—of cordiality, togetherness, warmth. Those kind of things. Of course also food. Especially when there is something to celebrate, then good food”.

In sum, eating foods from the home country is associated with feelings of togetherness and memories of said home country. The foods serve as a celebratory element at festive occasions, and because they are specific to specific cultures, they have the power to connect people with roots in or connections to those cultures. Moreover, the foods are used as a means to distinguish from the Dutch (eating) culture, which is considered bland and “loveless”. In connecting foods from the home country to celebrations and get-togethers, many respondents highlight their significance during special occasions, leaving aside the role of these foods in more regular meals.

## 5. Discussion

In this paper, we used a practice–theoretical approach to shed light on people’s food provisioning practices: we looked at “procurring” to better understand the material element of food provisioning, at “cooking” to unravel the element of skills, and at “eating” to apprehend its meaning. Zooming in on the material element, we found that the food environment offers most traditional ingredients that respondents require. Hence, unlike Yi et al. [19], who found that part of their respondents performed weekly shopping at their primary “ethnic store”, all our respondents generally visit supermarkets for their main

shopping, with more or less frequent visits to tokos. Our findings are more in line with those of O'Mara et al. [6], who studied people of Moroccan descent in two Amsterdam neighborhoods: they also report that respondents experience increased availability of traditional foods during their time in the Netherlands, with most traditional and culturally appropriate foods readily available. Even so, our respondents voice a similar complaint as those Moroccan respondents in Amsterdam [6] and as Somali respondents in Sweden [20]: the available food does not always taste the same as in people's home countries. Our finding that ingredients not available through the formal economy are found through informal networks is corroborated by Hammelman [34], who concludes that informal networks grant autonomy to eat the products and dishes that people want—even when not available through the formal system. Surprisingly, we did not find many examples of homemade produce in our data, even though Bailey [16] concludes that such produce is of great value to immigrants because they bring back memories.

In spite of the availability of ingredients from the home country, most interviewees have varied diets: they eat dishes from their home countries, as well as traditional Dutch dishes and dishes from cuisines that have permeated Dutch culture, such as Italian and Asian foods. This is in line with the findings of Aronsen Torp et al. [20], who found that their research participants eat a blend of Somali and Swedish food. In other words, while the material element enables people to eat food from their home countries, it does not in itself define how people eat. This finding both corroborates and nuances that of Rule et al. [10]. They argue that if people encounter another food environment—such as when they move elsewhere—this does not as such lead to dietary acculturation: change in diets also requires change in meanings and competences, for instance, supported by cross-cultural relationships. Our results show that if a food environment starts offering more culturally diverse produce, this does not stop a process of acculturation either, when meanings and competences have started changing.

Although cooking is considered a space for intergenerational cultural transmission, and “creative time-perfected skills become cultural capital to pass on to younger generations” ([22], p. 299), cooking skills are not automatically transferred—living in Dutch society, these need to be purposefully learned. Moreover, as everyday reality does not always grant enough time to cook dishes from home, people may rely on convenience foods or simplified recipes, as noted by Brons et al. [7]. This potentially affects the preservation of traditional culinary skills. Indeed, Aronsen Torp et al. [20] found that Somali respondents in Sweden do not have enough time to cook Somali food during the week because it is too time-consuming for their new lives, and Berggreen-Clausen et al. [35] conclude that time scarcity frequently disrupts traditional cooking practices, fostering dependence on more convenient food options. Other authors state that younger generations have limited time available to cook traditional recipes from scratch [7,14,36].

In relation to this changing cooking practice, also the meaning of food provisioning changed: “food from home” transferred from being an everyday food, to being cooked for celebrations<sup>4</sup>. This finding corroborates the findings of Aronsen Torp et al. [20], who state that their Somali respondents cook Somali food only at the weekend—because only then do they have the time to do so—and then invite other Somali people. Interestingly, though, where Nicolaou et al. [23] highlight the importance of religion and hospitality for how Dutch people with a Turkish or Moroccan background eat and feel about food, these topics hardly came up in our interviews. This is possibly related to the lack of people with these specific backgrounds in our sample.

Despite people not eating food from home every day, this food is important to people and helps them maintain a connection to the home country. This confirms findings shared in the literature. Nicolaou et al. [23] show that specific flavors, spices and ingredients are

important because they confirm people's identities and their connection with the home country. Also, both Volpato et al. [17] and Weller and Turkon [14] write that the choice to eat, share or prepare certain dishes helps people recall memories of family, friends and places left behind. By eating food that they associate with their homeland, people maintain ties despite the great distance in space and time. In other words, the food provisioning practices of people with a migration background are changing—regardless of the Almere food environment offering almost all people need in order to cook traditional foods. Thus, food provisioning practices are changing because both the meaning and the competences of food provisioning are changing within the reality of everyday life. As Shove et al. [32] explain, with the evolution of these elements, what this practice entails is evolving too.

A final note concerns our use of practice theory. Although we simplified the way in which SPT is generally used, this approach helped us understand how food provisioning practices are performed in everyday life and how these elements are connected. Indeed, the three activities of procuring, cooking and eating are strongly connected and interdependent and their elements difficult to distinguish. We use two examples to illustrate this. First, several—though not all—respondents noted that the same dishes taste differently (read: worse) in the Netherlands than in their home country. Like the Polish people in Ireland Coakley [3,4] wrote about, our respondents experience food from abroad as less tasteful or authentic when it is sold, cooked or eaten in the Netherlands. Charlotte states: "The authentic way of cooking, it just tastes different, the spices, it is totally different. It is the same: the same vegetables, the same chicken and so on, but it just, it tastes completely different". Some respondents argue that this is because ingredients are fresher in their home country, others because the growing conditions are different. Again others state that dishes in the Netherlands are adjusted to the Dutch taste, are less spicy, or have become "too commercial" (quick and cheap). Two of our respondents, however, explain that the food probably tastes different because of the different setting. Maria philosophizes: "Maybe it is in fact the whole ambiance around it—that you are just nice and sunny and cozy. That is different from being out here in the rain. . . So maybe that also counts towards the taste". Similarly, a respondent from O'Mara et al.'s [6] study, who also felt a "difference" in Morocco, thought that this difference was related to the ambiance. This implies that the material element of food cannot be judged on its own: not only is it influenced by the material surroundings but also the element of meaning influences how it is appreciated.

The second example concerns a strong connection between skills and meanings of cooking: in discussing cooking skills, respondents often touch on cooking's deeper meaning. For example, Irma, when reflecting on Filipino food, says: "For immigrants, the greatest danger is to lose yourself. But when I cook, I know who I am, and no one can take that away. Then you are—then you are—yourself. You are strongest if you know who you are and where you come from". Halina, on the other hand, talks about an intuitive sense of cooking: "I think it is a kind of inspiration. [. . .] When you make dishes that your grandmother or great-grandmother often made, you just do it by feel, as if you're guided while cooking. [. . .] If you follow that feeling, you'll know exactly how much of each ingredient to use, even without measuring". These examples demonstrate how cooking is both a skill and a meaningful practice, and requires various materials. Halina's cooking, done without measuring, but guided by intuition, memory, and a connection to family traditions, shows how cultural identity is maintained through these practices. For Halina, cooking is more than just a technical skill—it is a symbolic link to her roots. This illustrates how family memory and cultural continuity guide the preparation of food. Irma's reflection emphasizes how cooking helps affirm her identity as an immigrant. These reflections highlight the inseparable relationship between skill and meaning in cooking. The blending of these



elements underscores the need to analyze food provisioning as an integrated practice, where skills, material, and meaning interact and influence each other.

## 6. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to understand how food provisioning practices—procuring, cooking, and eating—of people with a migration background unfold in everyday life, and how this influences processes of acculturation. We explored how these food practices in Almere are shaped by the interplay of material availability, acquired competences, and cultural meanings. Our findings show that while most ingredients needed to cook traditional dishes can be found in Almere, people develop varied diets as they adapt to their (new) environment. These diets balance cultural traditions with practical constraints of modern life, such as time limitations and lagging cooking skills. Our findings highlight that practical realities shape food provisioning practices, and as people navigate their food routines they make practical choices that align with their daily routines and social environments. By analyzing food provisioning as an integrated practice, we show how material, symbolic, and skills-based elements are interconnected and constantly evolving.

A practice theory lens emphasizes the realities of everyday life and acknowledges that food routines reflect broader social and structural influences, while simultaneously highlighting that individuals exercise agency within these practices [27]. This perspective is important, as assumptions about the dietary patterns of people with a migration background tend to forget practical challenges such as convenience, time pressures, habits and routines [7]. We warmly invite public and private organizations to incorporate these insights into their food-related public health or marketing campaigns as well as in the types of foods they offer within their spheres of influence (e.g., canteens). To support citizens with a migration background to meaningfully integrate in society while staying in touch with their culinary heritage, municipalities, social services, and community initiatives could facilitate exchanges and get-togethers around food, where migrants and natives meet and learn from each other's food cultures and lifestyle tips. The lens of food has the unique potential to shine a positive light on migration, a theme that is so often negatively portrayed in the media and by politicians. How unimaginably boring would our supermarkets, shops, restaurants, and home-cooked meals be without international mobility and migration flows?

A limitation of this study is that our exploratory qualitative investigation used a limited and non-representative sample, which limits the exploration of food practices. Also, while we included respondents from different migrant generations, our sample was too small to make meaningful comparisons between first- and second-generation migrants. Finally, we used a slightly simplified theoretical framing. Future studies could build more elaborate datasets using diverse methodologies and a more balanced representation of migrant groups to further enhance the generalizability of our findings and to analyze potential differences in food provisioning practices between cultures, countries, and generations.

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## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

MDPI	Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute
DOAJ	Directory of Open Access Journals
TLA	three letter acronym
LD	linear dichroism
SPT	social practice theory

## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Participant information.

Respondent (Pseudonym)	Gender	Year of Birth	Age at Migration	Country of Birth; (Migration History)	Household	Relationship to (Other Respondents)
Anna	F	1961	13	Indonesia; Both parents born in Indonesia, moved to Suriname as 8-year-old	Married to a Dutch husband	Mother of Bernadette
Bernadette	F	1991	N/a	The Netherlands; Mother born in Indonesia, Dutch father		Daughter of Anna
Charlotte	F	1963	28	Suriname	Emigrated with husband and children	
Daisy	F	1962	19	Suriname		Aunt of Eva (oldest brother is Eva's father)
Eva	F	1983	5	Suriname		Niece of Daisy
Frank	M	1989	N/a	The Netherlands; Both parents born in the Netherlands: maternal grandparents moved to the Netherlands from Indonesia in 1954, Dutch father		Nephew of Gaby
Gaby	F	1955	N/a	The Netherlands; Both parents born in Indonesia: Gaby was born right after emigration		Aunt of Frank

Table A1. Cont.

Respondent (Pseudonym)	Gender	Year of Birth	Age at Migration	Country of Birth; (Migration History)	Household	Relationship to (Other Respondents)
Halina	F	1980	N/a	The Netherlands; Parents born in Guyana and Suriname		
Irma	F	1971	22	The Philippines	Married to a Dutch husband	Mother of Jane
Jane	F	1994	Baby	The Philippines; Moved with mother from the Philippines to the Netherlands when she was a baby. Dutch father		Daughter of Irma
Kathrin	F	1969	31	Mexico	Married to Iranian husband	Mother of Lea
Lea	F	2005	N/a	The Netherlands; Mexican mother and Iranian father	Lives with parents	Daughter of Kathrin
Maria	F	1988	N/a	The Netherlands; Father from Ghana moved to the Netherlands in the 1980s. Dutch mother, Nigerian stepfather	Dutch partner	
Nathan	M	1965	5	Suriname	Married to Dutch wife	
Olivia	F	1949	26	Curaçao: Moved to Suriname as 12-year-old		
Paula	F	1929	17	Indonesia; Born in Indonesia, moved with parents to the Netherlands		Mother of Quirine and Romana
Quirine	F	1954	N/a	The Netherlands; Indonesian mother, Dutch father		Daughter of Paula, sister of Romana
Romana	F	1957	N/a	The Netherlands; Indonesian mother, Dutch father		Daughter of Paula, sister of Quirine

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A *toko* is a common word used in Dutch to refer to ethnic supermarkets, usually but not necessarily of Asian descent.

<sup>2</sup> A *warung* is a small takeaway joint, usually associated with Indonesian cuisine.

<sup>3</sup> In a section on cooking skills, a discussion on gender is to be expected. The literature often shows how, especially in the first generation, it is mostly women who cook traditional foods and carry over these skills to the next generation. See, for instance, [11,13,22]. However, our findings do not warrant such a conclusion. Although respondents did indeed mention female culinary role models, in a few cases, it was especially the Dutch husband of a migrated woman who learned to cook traditional

dishes, sometimes from their migrated family-in-law. Our data are therefore not conclusive on gender, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this further.

- 4 Important to note is that some people have held on tighter to these foods than others. The food environment—the material element of the practice—enabled them to do so.

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