

## **FusionFest Proposal**

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Cultural Diplomacy Final

**Proposal:** a food fair and contest that involves combining different ethnic foods found in the Los Angeles area for a consular tag-team Battle Royale of culinary diplomacy and cultural exchange. Iron Chef meets the Consular Corps meets cultural diplomacy.

**Background:** Culinary diplomacy is perhaps one of the most ancient avenues of cultural exchange. In the realms of trade, ritual or goodwill gestures, food has long served as a utensil of cultural diplomacy<sup>1</sup>. Culinary diplomacy serves as an engaging means of cultural diplomacy because it allows people to partake in universal custom while highlighting similarities or introducing differences in non-threatening manner that can promote the sharing of values or exotic differences. As celebrated gourmand James Beard stated, “Food is our common ground, a universal experience.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, culinary pursuits have shaped our modern world, as explorers and navigators set in motion an age of discovery while in search of alternative routes to the spice kingdoms of the Orient. Centuries of migration, and more recently the period of globalization, has played a role in changing people’s tastes, and has expanded the palate of many cultures as it has spread various ingredients, spices and flavors to far-reaching

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<sup>1</sup> Lesley Prendergast and Aoife Flood, “Culinary Diplomacy: Food as Cultural Diplomacy,” Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, November 19 2008, available at <[http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/index.php?en\\_events\\_food](http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/index.php?en_events_food)>

<sup>2</sup> CF ibid

parts of the globe. An emblematic and oft-cited example remains that curry houses in Britain today employ more people than steel, coal and shipbuilding industries combined<sup>3</sup>.

In the American context, *The Economist* notes, “Diplomats in Washington point out that restaurants are often the only contact that most Americans have with foreign cultures.<sup>4</sup>” In an American reality that exists where most do not own a passport, culinary sampling is a means by which most Americans get to know different cultures.

**Culinary Diplomacy:** Countries have even made gastro-diplomacy the hallmark of their cultural outreach. Given the growing popularity of Thai restaurants around the globe, in 2002, the government of Thailand implemented the “Global Thai” program as a means to increase the number of Thai restaurants. The Thai government’s rationale was that the boom in restaurants, “will not only introduce delicious spicy Thai food to thousands of new tummies and persuade more people to visit Thailand, but it could subtly help deepen relations with other countries.<sup>5</sup>”

Historically, food diplomacy through aid has played a role in American public diplomacy efforts. In 1959, the Eisenhower administration enacted the Food for Peace initiative (Public Law 480) to send US surplus abroad to help fight hunger<sup>6</sup>. More recently, in the wake of the tsunami in South Asia in 2004, US aid relief including the

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<sup>3</sup> Shashi Tharoor, “Making the Most of India’s ‘soft power,’” *The Times of India*, January 28, 2007, available at < <http://www.shashitharoor.com/articles/toi/softpower.php> >; “Mad for Masala,” *BBC News*, November 10, 1998, available at < [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/211002.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/211002.stm) >;

<sup>4</sup> “Thailand’s gastro-diplomacy,” *The Economist*, February 23, 2002

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> William Lambers, “Food For Peace: Eisenhower’s Unsung Initiative can be Obama’s Most Powerful Tool for Peace,” *History News Network*, February 9, 2009, available at < <http://www.hnn.us/articles/61472.html> >

provision of food stock and supplies helped burnish the American public diplomacy image abroad<sup>7</sup>.

Moreover, the US State Department has cooked up its own culinary diplomacy ventures by using Embassy employees to promote American recipes in their respective post countries. American culinary diplomacy ventures have come in the form of the US Embassy in Prague's public affairs officer visiting a culinary school to teach Czech students traditional American recipes like meatloaf, mashed potatoes, all while discussing aspects of life in America, or a US Embassy employee appearing on Armenian television to offer his award-winning chili recipe, while discussing life in America<sup>8</sup>. To paraphrase the old American public diplomacy maxim, "to taste us is to love us."

**Los Angeles and fusion cuisine:** Food fusion between different ethnic groups has been part of California culture and Los Angeles vogue for quite some time. Nearly two-and-a-half decades ago, Robert Lindsey of the *New York Times* commented,

"In recent years, California has been at the receiving end of a tide of immigration from Asia, Latin America, Europe and other parts of the world that is probably unmatched since the great trans-Atlantic migrations to New York at the turn of the century. Originally inspired in part and still largely influenced by the cooking of Northern Italy, the state's cuisine is melding the culinary styles of Western Europe with those of Japan, China, Southeast Asia, Mexico, the American Indian and others."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Tom McCawley, "US tsunami aid still reaps goodwill," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 26, 2006, available at, <<http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0228/p12s01-woap.html>>

<sup>8</sup> See: Czech Republic: [http://prague.usembassy.gov/071121\\_kladno.html](http://prague.usembassy.gov/071121_kladno.html); Armenia: <http://www.usa.am/news/2009/march/news032709.php>

<sup>9</sup> Robert Lindsey, "California Grows Her Own Cuisine," *New York Times*, August 18, 1985, available at <<http://www.nytimes.com/1985/08/18/travel/california-grows-her-own-cuisine.html?sec=travel&pagewanted=print>>

Meanwhile, with its multitudes of different communities living in close proximity, the Los Angeles area, which is home to people from more than 140 countries, has long been considered the epicenter of fusion cuisine<sup>10</sup>.

More recently, the Los Angeles dining scene has been abuzz with Korean-Mexican fusion cuisine. The Kogi Taco Truck, which sends out its location via Twitter and features Korean-Mexican fusion fare, has become a veritable cult phenomenon on the LA dining scene. Lines snake for up to two hours, as hungry diners wait to eat barbecued beef tacos slathered in Korean “salsa roja,” and topped with cilantro, onions, cabbage slaw and soy-sesame chili. The *LA Times* comments on the popularity, “perhaps it’s the exquisite cultural co-mingling inherent in the food that draws the crowds; the only-in-LA combination of two of the city’s most beloved ethnic cuisines.”<sup>11</sup>

According to Kogi owner Roy Choi, the idea “was to bring his ethnic background together with the sensibility and geography of Los Angeles, where Koreatown abuts Latin-dominate neighborhoods in midcity, and where food cultures have long merged. Former Mexican restaurants, now Korean, serves burritos, and Mexican workers populate the kitchens of Korean restaurants.” The popularity of Kogi and Korean-Mexican fusion food has led to other restaurants in the area getting involved in the act, as well as Korean taco trucks beginning to pop up in New York<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, other ethnic foods are also pushing fusion cuisine like the Indian-Mexican tikka tacos available at 23<sup>rd</sup> Street Café near USC, or Japanese tacos found in Little Tokyo<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://discoverlosangeles.com/guides/fun-facts/did-you-know.html>

<sup>11</sup> Jessica Gelt, “Kogi Korean BBQ, a taco truck brought to you by Twitter,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 11, 2009, available at <[http://www.latimes.com/theguide/restaurants/la-fo-kogi11-2009feb11\\_0\\_4560062.story](http://www.latimes.com/theguide/restaurants/la-fo-kogi11-2009feb11_0_4560062.story)>

<sup>12</sup> See: “Suck it, LA: New York has Korean tacos too,” available at <[http://eater.com/archives/2009/04/eat\\_it\\_kogi\\_truck\\_nyc\\_has\\_korean\\_tacos\\_too.php](http://eater.com/archives/2009/04/eat_it_kogi_truck_nyc_has_korean_tacos_too.php)>;

<sup>13</sup> See: <http://www.dailytrojan.com/lifestyle/la-taquiza-fuses-korean-and-mexican-traditions-1.1629396>; <http://la.eater.com/tags/kogi>

**Program:** Given the growing wave of popularity for fusion cuisine in the Los Angeles-area, the goal of FusionFest would be to expand the reach of culinary cross-cultural sharing. The point of the fair and contest would be to bring different cultures together, especially ethnic groups that live in close proximity yet don't often interact.

Respective consulates would be linked for participation in the one-day food fair/contest of culinary fusion. Priorities would be given for pairings to diasporic communities that live in close proximity. For example, pairing preference would be given to the Armenian and Philippine Consulates due to the close proximity of the Filipino and Armenian communities in Glendale. Another example would be pairing of the Bangladesh and Korean Consulates and communities since there has recently been a minor spat over naming rights for Koreatown/Little Bangladesh<sup>14</sup>.

Of the 101 countries that possess consulates in the Los Angeles area, the contest would be limited to the 62 countries that maintain Career Consulates, and would exclude the 39 Honorary Consular countries. The list would be further pared down for preference to consulates with substantial communities in the Los Angeles area. For countries that do not have consular representatives yet maintain large diaspora communities (Iran, Vietnam), arrangements would be made to include the diasporic communities in the festival via Chambers of Commerce and community leadership organizations\*.

Consulates would be paired up, and would identify a restaurant that offers cuisine from each respective country. The joint consulate/restaurant team would then work

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<sup>14</sup> See: Alexandra Zavis and Corina Knoll, "A Spicy Turf Battle in Koreatown," April 1, 2009, available <[http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-koreatown1-2009apr01\\_0\\_7250407.story](http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-koreatown1-2009apr01_0_7250407.story)>

\* Other diplomatic hurdles like Taiwan would be broached by pairing the country with a nation that formally recognizes it.

together to prepare fusion food that would be offered at the fair. Given the prominence and free advertising associated with partaking in the FusionFest fair, the restaurants would be expected to donate samples of the food associated with the day's events, while purchasing options for the fare would be a secondary component for the restaurants participating. The paired consulates would promote their countrymen's respective food fares at booths, and could stock their respective booths with pamphlets and paraphernalia highlighting their respective countries.

Contest judges could possibly include: Wolfgang Puck, Jonathan Gold of *LA Weekly*, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, Dean of the LA Consular Corp, Mark Dacascos (Chairman, Iron Chef America) and Lynne Kasper of *The Splendid Table* (NPR).

Meanwhile, a popular vote would be held among the visitors to the fair for favorite fusion food. Although this program is designed as a pilot, future FusionFests could include fusion cooking classes and musical fusion performances.

**Sponsors/Partners/Media/ Advertising:** First and foremost, the major partner would be the LA Consular community and LA Consular Corps. Other possible partners could include the various LA-area Chambers of Commerce, LA Mayor's Office, LA Visitors Bureau, Los Angeles World Affairs Council, and the numerous cultural centers dedicated to the various ethnic groups living in the Los Angeles area.

Possible media partners and avenues for promotion include: The Food Network, The Travel Channel, the television program *Iron Chef America*, *Los Angeles Times's* Food Section and *LA Weekly's* famous food critic Jonathan Gold, National Public Radio

program's *The Splendid Table*. Given the nature of the event, local media coverage would be expected.

A website would be created for the FusionFest event and contest, including blogs for the respective Consular contestants and twitter for the judges of the fusion food contest. The website would also stream the fusion food contest, as well as interviews with the contestants, participants and judges. Distinctions would be awarded for the best foods, as decided by the judges and visitors.

Advertising would come through promotion of the event through respective consular email lists, work with cultural affairs offices of respective consulates and the various ethnic community organizations of the various countries. Small advertisements would be placed in the food section of the *LA Times* and *LA Weekly* as well as advertisements in the local ethnic press newspapers. Social networking sites would also be employed to conduct viral marketing of the contest.

**Budget:** With the allocated \$10,000 budget

Advertising.....	\$2,000
Public Venue.....	\$2,000 or by civic donation
Stalls, Booths, Stage rental.....	\$3,000
Labor.....	\$1,500 or volunteer
Website design.....	\$1,500
Food.....	provided by restaurants

**LA Consulate Pairings**

1. Armenia & The Philippines
2. Peru & Indonesia
3. Colombia & Azerbaijan
4. Bolivia & Belgium
5. Brazil & Japan
6. Canada & Uruguay
7. Croatia & Costa Rica
8. Thailand & The Netherlands
9. Czech Republic & Australia
10. Argentina & South Africa
11. El Salvador & Vietnamese community
12. Ethiopia & Israel
13. France & Chile
14. Afghanistan & Guatemala
15. Honduras & Taiwan
16. Kenya & Kuwait
17. Republic of Korea & Bangladesh
18. Lebanon & United Kingdom
19. Malaysia & Peru
20. Mexico & Germany
21. Turkey & Poland
22. Nicaragua & Iranian Community
23. Pakistan & Greece
24. People's Republic of China & Italy
25. Spain & New Zealand
26. Sri Lanka & Sweden
27. Switzerland & Saudi Arabia

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La Taquiza

[http://www.dailytrojan.com/lifestyle/la-taquiza-fuses-korean-and-mexican-traditions-](http://www.dailytrojan.com/lifestyle/la-taquiza-fuses-korean-and-mexican-traditions-1.1629396)

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