

Health Perspectives Among Senegalese Immigrants in Cincinnati, Ohio

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Over the past 30 years immigration from West Africa has increased exponentially. For those migrating from Senegal to the United States, New York City was the primary destination. From there communities have developed in other cities around the U.S., such as Cincinnati. The greater Cincinnati area, including the area of Kentucky just across the Ohio River, has seen the development of a small, but vibrant community of West Africans. As a result of the influx of African migrants in the region, businesses catering to their needs have also developed. For the past decade in Cincinnati, a small Africa-centric food landscape has become visible.

For the months of June and July, 2011, I conducted research in Cincinnati at a small African market and the neighboring Senegalese res-



taurant, both owned and operated by the same individual. For the two months that I was there, I located myself, for the most part, in the dining room, interviewing customers and watching the day-to-day activities which took place. My research focused primarily on the development of the West African food landscape and the shifting dietary requirements of the Senegalese population living there. By tapping into a global network of food producers,



shippers, and manufacturers, the owner of a small African market and the adjacent Senegalese restaurant, who formerly worked for a global food distributor, has succeeded in developing a business which caters to the desires of not only the West African community, but also Asian and Caribbean immigrant communities. This small restaurant has managed to create a cuisine which is largely West African, focusing primarily on Senegalese cuisine, but has also hybridized its menu to cater to multi-ethnic tastes. Additionally, they alter the amount and content of each dish depending on the assumed tastes of the customer. For instance, an American customer will receive more meat and less rice, while an African customer will receive more rice and less meat.

Dietary choice is largely dictated by access, which in turn may have very real or possibly harmful effects on the health of the individual. Diabetes, heart disease, hypertension (high blood pressure), and obesity are very real concerns among immigrants traversing the American food landscape. How knowledge about food and dietary choice is obtained and how immigrant populations use this knowledge is important in learning how to assist individuals in coping with and possibly preventing such chronic

diseases. Knowledge acquisition by way of the media, word of mouth, or lived experience has the ability to alter personal decisions in relation to health in diverse ways. For some immigrants the answer may be exercise, for others it may be through the adoption of food avoidance strategies. For many of those Senegalese in Cincinnati which I interviewed, it is apparent that an adherence to a more “traditional” or “authentic” Senegalese diet is the answer, no matter how global that diet may in fact be.



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