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A look at how 5 immigrants have redefined Buffalo's restaurant scene

Francesca Bond 4 hrs ago 9



rolynn Welch, executive director of the Westminster Economic Development Initiative, (WEDI) talks about the West Side Bazaar location on Niagara Street.

Many of the foods we eat in Buffalo have been touched by immigrant hands. Mexican migrant workers picked your apple. Burmese refugees wrapped your pizza log. Sudanese refugees washed the plate holding your barbecue.



Nathalie Zola Malu, owner of Malkia & Co. at the West Side Bazaar, serves food that is inspired by her native country, the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Derek Gee/Buffalo News

About 7% of the people living in the Buffalo-Cheektowaga metro area were born outside of the United States, according to U.S. census data. Ten percent of them work in the service industry, including food, hospitality and entertainment.

Several waves of immigrants and refugees have been redefining local food in recent years. Foods that were nonexistent in Buffalo are now served in several neighborhoods.

“If you have somebody that has come in from out of town and you want to take them out to dinner, they can dine around the world,” said Jennifer Rizzo-Choi, executive director of the International Institute of Buffalo. “We’re not a huge city, but you can take them for fabulous Burmese food. There’s Turkish food in Depew, Yemeni food on the East Side, Somali food on the West Side, Afghan food in West Seneca ... Buffalo is the city of foodies, and if you come and you start serving good food here, people are going to go eat it.”

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Below are the stories of five local restaurateurs who have reshaped Buffalo's food scene, despite the adversity that comes with uprooting your life in hope of a better future.



Chef Darian Bryan, an immigrant from Jamaica, brings the flavors of his upbringing to his Larkintown restaurant Bratt's Hill. "You've got to prove yourself over and over and you gotta constantly fight your way up there," he says.

Derek Gee photos, Buffalo News

Darian Bryan

Darian Bryan grew up in a crowded house without electricity or running water in rural Jamaica. At 20, the opportunity for a better life – and experiencing his first snowfall – brought him to Buffalo.

There was a lot about American life that Bryan didn't know. He didn't know much about the food, for one – “Never seen pancake before. Never seen bacon ... never eat pizza a day in my life” – nor the nuanced social cues, such as the way Americans sometimes say one thing but mean another. But he was ready to learn whatever it took to open his own restaurant.

He trained four years in culinary arts and hospitality to help him open something that hadn't been done around here, or very many places. He opened **Bratts Hill**, an upscale Jamaican restaurant, in Larkinville in 2023. He brought new dishes to Buffalo, such as cassava fries and ackee-and-saltfish spring rolls, and a new way to experience Caribbean cuisine with Bratt's, a fine dining – not casual – restaurant that values service and ambiance as highly as food quality.

“You've got to prove yourself over and over and you gotta constantly fight your way up there, because nobody's gonna look at you or see you until you reach your top. You have to work twice as hard,” Bryan said. “When I first started school, I feel like I was so behind, because everything was just so new to me, and these folks were born into this. They know what a medium-rare steak is. They know what bacon is. They know what all this fancy stuff is. I don't know any of that stuff. I have to read books night and day, every day, go to the computer lab, studying. Just so much for me to catch up on ... I work hard for this.”

Leonel Rosario

Food was scarce in rural Oaxaca, Mexico, where Leonel Rosario grew up. He ate the spoils of his father's hunting – mostly rabbits – with beans, tortilla and salsa. As a tween, he moved across the border with his family. They spent their summers picking apples in New York and winters harvesting strawberries in Florida.

Years after settling in Medina, Rosario and his brothers opened a Mexican restaurant, **Mariachi de Oro**, and served familiar fare.

Then Rosario tried something new. He peppered the menu with traditional Oaxacan food such as mole, a dark and complex sauce made of chocolate, peppers and a couple of dozen other ingredients. Mole is important in Oaxaca, where each family “makes it with their own touch,” he said.

“It's food from generations and generations,” Rosario said. “They have so much history behind them.”

Unique to Rosario's restaurant, Oaxacan food drew people from across the region to rural Medina. He opened a second restaurant, **Maizal Mexican Kitchen**, in East Amherst in 2019.

“You find that years go by, and then you start creating your own family,” Rosario said. “And all of a sudden, you look around and you are part of the community ... so you decide: I love it here, and I think this is what I want to believe. You decide, OK, maybe I’m just gonna stay here and enjoy everything.”



Nathalie Zola Malu makes the traditional Congolese food of her childhood at Malkia & Co. in the West Side Bazaar. “Happiness is a choice ... I’m happy because I’m living. I am free,” Zola Malu says.

Derek Gee, Buffalo News

Nathalie Zola Malu

Nathalie Zola Malu studied for eight years to become a pharmacist in France. She found her work to be lucrative and fulfilling. After moving to Buffalo, she learned that her degree wouldn’t be honored without additional schooling – a tall ask for a working, single mom.

At the prompting of her young daughter, Zola Malu pursued what she calls the “first medicine”: food.

Zola Malu opened **Malkia & Co.** in the new West Side Bazaar. She makes the traditional Congolese food of her childhood, such as the street food ngulu, which is braised pork shoulder, and a popular stewed chicken dish in peanut sauce. It’s all made from scratch, from her spice mixtures to sauces.

She lives thousands of miles away from the rest of her family, but feels like she can find home anywhere because she is open to all cultures. It's a philosophy she developed living a life with several distinct acts. She grew up in the Democratic Republic of Congo, left as a refugee for France at age 16, then moved to Buffalo when her daughter was young.

"When you travel, you have a free mind ... You're not going to fear the life," Zola Malu said. "I can live anywhere in the earth. I'm not gonna feel alone. I feel just like a fish in the water."

She's no longer interested in working at a pharmacy. Now, she dreams of expanding her restaurant into multiple locations.

"Happiness is a choice," Zola Malu said. "Because I have a passion for this, I'm happy even though the circumstance, even though everything, I'm happy because I'm living. I am free. And when I have all this feedback from the customer, he makes me proud of myself because I bring something new to the people and then the people start enjoying it, so I feel I do my part in the world. I try to impact through my food."

Oded Rauvenpoor

When Oded Rauvenpoor moved from Israel to Buffalo (with a long stop in New York City to study culinary arts), he found a city with limited Middle Eastern food options and "fake Greek food."

So he started serving mostly fake Greek food at his first restaurant, The Greek. Falafel – the real, freshly ground chickpea kind – and other Middle Eastern foods from back home rounded out the other 10%.

People noticed the latter. (The first line of former Buffalo News food critic Janice Okun's 2003 review said: "The first thing to know about The Greek is that it is not Greek.")

What made Rauvenpoor's restaurant different is what made him successful. He opened a second spot, Falafel Bar, in the Elmwood Village, where he became the city's falafel guy.

His business has expanded and contracted throughout the years. After "losing everything," he learned that more isn't always better, and he now has just one restaurant, **Falafel Bar**, where he serves his Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern food.



7 salads that are menu stars at Buffalo restaurants

For many Buffalo restaurants, salads aren't an afterthought thrown on the menu for the especially health-conscious. They're the leading lady (or at least they play a role so important

“Cooking that food and serving it and selling it made me feel personally better, because when you’re an immigrant, you always have that hole. You always have that thing that’s missing,” Rauvenpoor said. “Cooking that food made me rooted, keeping my heritage going.”

they could be nominated for best supporting actress).

Kevin Lin

Kevin Lin recently entered what he’s calling semi-retirement. “I want to enjoy my life, so I want be semi-retired with 40 hours.”

A regular full-time workweek is retirement for Lin, who has spent decades bouncing from one entrepreneurial pursuit to the next in several countries. He was never going to let himself be unsuccessful.



Kevin Lin, a native of Burma, introduced Buffalo to unique culinary flavors through his Sun restaurants.

Derek Gee, Buffalo News

Lin opened his first business, a clothing store, in his home country of Myanmar (Burma) in his early 20s, but struggled to make money in a country that has been in a long civil war for decades following British colonialism. “I see people killing, destroying country,” Lin said.

He left his store behind and moved to Japan for a more lucrative job as a restaurant dishwasher, then worked his way up to sous chef. Lin and his wife, Stephanie, eventually won a visa lottery for a new life in America, moving to Buffalo in the late 1990s, where he networked to earn his big break, opening the first Wegmans sushi franchise.

Lin left Wegmans to open Sun International Market, a Burmese-Thai-Japanese restaurant and grocery market on the West Side, in 2010. He was doing a few things that were new to the area, including making sushi with black rice, but his Burmese food most excited the community.

Through his restaurant, Lin opened a door between Buffalo residents and its growing Burmese community. He served foods such as tea leaf salad and the currylike dish *own no koksware*. Lin **closed the original Sun restaurant**, but still operates **Sun Cuisines** in Williamsville and a food truck. He also mentors Burmese immigrants and refugees to empower them to open their own businesses.

“Food industry is, before us, Italian, Polish, German, Chinese, all immigrants. They had restaurants ...” Lin said. “This is only my dream before. It’s not here, but I dream. Why Italian people can do it? Why no Burmese guy can do it?”

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By Francesca Bond

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