How One Delicious Salad Can Create Global Citizens

With a long history of forced assimilation and cultural erasure, is the “Great American Melting Pot” really something to strive toward? Many scholars prefer the metaphor of the “Great American Chopped Salad,” and a prime example of that is right in Pepperdine’s backyard.

Irene Ruiz smiles for a photo in the shop she works at on Olvera Street, where she sells Mexican-imported items like pottery and leather goods.

1891
Construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad began

1904
Russo-Japanese War began
Colorful flags wave and the smell of Los Angeles’ most famous taquitos float through the air as Mariachi music plays and vendors call out in Spanish from their booths. This is Olvera Street — a little slice of Mexico nestled in Downtown LA — only a 34-minute drive from Pepperdine.

Short drives of 10 miles or less can transport a person from Mexico to China, then to Tokyo and Ethiopia, all without leaving Los Angeles. Many believe that the city serves as a living example of the “Great American Melting Pot” metaphor Schoolhouse Rock made famous.

But scholars today take issue with the melting pot metaphor and have begun pushing a different metaphor that sends a contrasting message: “The Great American Chopped Salad.”

“The problem with the melting pot metaphor is that it implies that all of this uniqueness and all of this difference is going to finally disappear and even out and that we are moving toward some kind of standardization of the American experience,” said Jeffrey Schultz, professor of Western Culture and English. “I don’t think that is a good way to approach it and I think we would do well to preserve as much uniqueness as we can.”

Why salad?

While comparing America to a melting pot suggests assimilation and homogeneity, the chopped salad metaphor allows for various cultural groups to come together as ingredients and form one cohesive American “dish” while still retaining their unique cultural flavor.

“It’s a better ideal,” Schultz said. “It is a better thing to reach toward — to preserve these differences and come to appreciate how these very different [cultures] can sit with each other and all be a part of the same wonderful thing. That would be a wonderful way for the world to work.”

Yet Schultz also said there are deeply rooted economic and societal forces at play that push Americans toward sameness and melt away important differences.

All immigrants to the United States have historically been viewed as an “ethnic other,” History Professor Tuan Hoang said. They experienced forced assimilation into the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture at the hands of the American government and sociocultural pressures.

The U.S. government enforced The Native American Assimilation Act from 1790 until 1920, giving indigenous people “American” names and forcing their children to attend “American” schools, Hoang said. There they would cut their hair despite its significant spiritual meaning, and punish any show of Native culture with brutality.

Enslaved African-Americans, who were brought to America, were intentionally divorced from their culture and ancestral stories and forced to obtain the last name of their enslavers, Hoang said. The slave trade and all that followed has led Black people in the U.S. to lack a significant understanding of their ethnic heritage and ancestry.

As recently as the 1960s, The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 diversified the groups entering the United States, eliminating the national origins quota.
system and increasing the number of immigrants allowed from each nation-state. This drastically increased the influx of immigrants to the U.S. from Asia, Hoang said.

The metaphor of the chopped salad poses a challenge to the history of the melting pot and encourages America’s various cultural groups to stand out and embrace what makes them special.

And in downtown Los Angeles, they are doing just that.

The salad bar of Los Angeles

All less than 10 miles from one another, LA’s cultural districts provide an opportunity for locals and tourists alike to learn about other cultures without ever leaving Southern California.

“I do feel like growing up in the LA area I got to be exposed to cultures that I would be unfamiliar with otherwise,” said Arianna Shishoian, Pepperdine first-year and recruitment chair of the Armenian Student Association, who grew up in Glendale.

Schultz agreed. After living in Oregon and Michigan, he said living in LA was a culture shock in the best way.

“I lived in East Hollywood my first year in California,” Schultz said. “I have this specific memory, walking four or five blocks down to the post office, and I think I would hear probably a dozen languages on my way there. It was fantastic.”

The people who live and work in these communities are eager to share their stories and their culture with the people around them.

Aki, an Ethiopian immigrant who declined to give her last name, has owned a shop in Little Ethiopia and watched the community evolve over her 30 years living in the United States. She believes that anyone interested in Ethiopian culture should visit Little Ethiopia’s various shops and restaurants.

“This is a good place. The food, the coffee ceremonies, the culture,” she said. “The whole thing you can learn here. Everything right here.”

She said that while Ethiopian immigrants own most of the shops and restaurants, the surrounding neighborhoods are very American.

“Ninety percent of the customers are American because they love our food; the community is safe,” Aki said. “They have everything. They have restaurants, the market, they can buy any spice. If he wants to cook at home, he can

1920 19th Amendment for Women’s Suffrage was passed

1929 The Great Depression began
World War II began

1941

Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor

Aki, an Ethiopian immigrant who works at and owns the shop Merkato, watched the Los Angeles landscape evolve around her over the last 30 years in Little Ethiopia.
Dresses hang outside of a shop on Olvera Street. These dresses on display provide a window into the Mexican culture.

Pepperdine’s backyard garden

Pepperdine has become a more multicultural place over time, Schultz said, but he still does not believe that global citizenship can be achieved without venturing off of the Malibu campus.

“We’re an exclusive community within a very exclusive community, so this is not the place to encounter difference,” Schultz said. “There is the problem of being here, being isolated, being in Malibu. I think everyone who can, should go into Los Angeles as much as possible. Like, one of the great global cities is right there. And you could go eat in a different neighborhood, go find a different cuisine once a week.”

Shishoian agreed. While she loves to visit home for a traditional Armenian or Lebanese meal, she also looks forward to exploring LA even further and venturing out of the comfort zone of her own culture.

“My suitemates and I will go get boba in LA all the time, or we’ll go grab Thai food or Mexican food from places we know will be authentic,” she said. “It’s cool to introduce girls who are from other states to California in that way.”

Schultz echoed Nikki and Aki and urged any Pepperdine student who may be interested in cultures other than their own to come and explore the cultural districts of LA.

“The restaurant that you should go to is the one where there aren’t any people who look like you,” Schultz said. “If you express any interest in someone else’s culture you will learn about it because they want to talk to you about it and are proud of what they’re doing.”

A restaurant-grocery store combination in Chinatown, LA, features pan-Asian dishes and Vietnamese sandwiches, rather than strictly Chinese food.