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## Pittsburgh cafe offers cuisine from the U.S. conflict du jour

The Conflict Kitchen specializes in dishes and discourse from countries involved in scraps with America. Cuban food is next in line.

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Dawn Weleski, center, talks with passersby at the takeout window of the Conflict Kitchen, which serves dishes from countries with which the U.S. is in conflict. (Keith Srakocic, Associated Press / May 29, 2010)

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By Tina Susman, Los Angeles Times  
May 7, 2012 | 6:33 p.m.

PITTSBURGH — Jon Rubin had an important question, and he knew where to find the answer: at the North Korean Embassy in Cuba, which he was visiting in March on a business trip.

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A man in jogging clothes and flip-flops came to the embassy gate after Rubin and his small entourage of fellow Americans rang the doorbell at the ornate diplomatic mission on a tree-lined street in Havana's Vedado neighborhood.

The Americans posed the question: What exactly do they eat in North Korea?

"He was a little surprised," Rubin's business partner, Dawn Weleski, said of the Korean attache, who could be forgiven if he thought that the Americans were fishing for secrets beyond kimchi recipes.

But Rubin and Weleski are used to head-scratching reactions since they opened the Conflict Kitchen, a Pittsburgh cafe that serves cuisine only from countries in conflict with the United States, with a menu that rotates to reflect the war or diplomatic row of the moment.

The cafe opened in 2010, with Iranian food the first featured cuisine. That was followed by periods of Afghan and Venezuelan food. This month, in a sign of the lingering tension between Washington and Tehran, the Conflict Kitchen is wrapping up another Iranian iteration. One recent Saturday, it featured a Persian dinner party attended by customers in Pittsburgh and diners in Tehran, who were linked via video chat.

Cuban cuisine will be next, incorporating ideas that Rubin, Weleski and Conflict Kitchen's culinary director, Robert Sayre, picked up in Havana. Then, perhaps, they'll try North Korean food.

"People are going to be thinking, 'Are we going to be eating twigs and rocks?'" Rubin joked as he repaired the cafe's front counter, where employees dish out food and try to get customers to talk about the conflict du jour.

One thing Rubin learned from the Korean diplomat, who was polite but did not let his uninvited guests into the embassy, is that North Korean cuisine isn't much different from South Korean. The two countries were, after all, one until 1945, the diplomat reminded them in flawless Spanish. He noted, however, that northerners lean toward buckwheat rather than rice noodles.

For now, Conflict Kitchen offers only takeout service and serves only lunch, drawing 30 to 50 customers on a good day, sometimes more.

That will change this summer when it moves downtown and opens as a full restaurant. But whether customers are sitting at a table in midtown Pittsburgh or standing on a sidewalk in the East Liberty neighborhood, the key to Conflict Kitchen is not just the food but the conversation. Both are served by employees hired in part for their ability to discuss world affairs.

"Our desire is to not to simplify, but to complicate the way ... people think about another country," said Rubin, an artist who hit upon the idea for Conflict Kitchen as he and Weleski were trying to decide how to use the tiny storefront adjacent to Rubin's Waffle Shop diner, which opened in 2008.

"We wanted to do takeout because we wanted to engage with people on the street, and we didn't really have room for sit-down," said Weleski, a former art student of Rubin's who went on to manage the Waffle Shop.

The pair already had a following from the Waffle Shop, where employees conduct an offbeat, [live-streamed talk show](#) as customers devour waffles. Guests have ranged from local politicians to ordinary diners lured onstage to banter about everything from men wearing Speedos to unrequited love. The show's bouncy musical intro and its set, with orange plastic chairs and a backdrop of satiny drapes, were inspired by 1960s and '70s talk shows.

"At the Waffle Shop, we use food to seduce people to get up onstage. At Conflict Kitchen, we use it to

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get people to open up and talk to strangers," said Rubin, an associate professor of art at Carnegie Mellon University who has a master of fine arts degree from California College of the Arts and specializes in using public places as art projects to explore human behavior.

He founded the Independent School of Art in San Francisco, which had no physical structure and operated solely on a barter system from 2005-07; he set up the Museum of Modern Failure in Pittsburgh for one semester in 2007, where his students used failure as the context for their contributions.

To Rubin, the Waffle Shop is as much an art project as a diner because it puts human behavior on public display, something he is also doing at Conflict Kitchen.

The effort extends to the food wrappers, which feature comments from people whose home country's cuisine is on the menu: "Generally speaking, Iranian people have no issues with the Jewish people," for instance, or: "Most Americans who I have encountered think that Iranians are ugly, aggressive, violent, terrorists, Islamists and uncivilized."

Both comments were on the wrappers of hot meat and vegetarian sandwiches being handed out on an unseasonably cold Saturday in late April by Lauren Pucci.

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**unclesmrgol** at 7:09 AM May 08, 2012

Of course, the ambiance is nothing like that in the countries "in conflict" with the US. For North Korean cuisine, your child would have a portion of seven kernels of corn on your plate, and just when said child was about to eat it, their teacher would show up at the table and beat them to death for hoarding food.

<http://frontpagemag.com/2012/04/30/north-korea-campout/>

For Iraqi cuisine, the meal would be served by a girl deliberately kept out of school for that purpose.

<http://www.irinnews.org/Report/75037/IRAQ-Number-of-girls-attending-school-dropping-say-analysts>

There are plenty of Iranian restaurants here in LA (they often call themselves "Persian Restaurants"), and the food is good, but if the proprietors of the "Conflict Kitchen" want to highlight Iranian culture, the waiter or waitress cannot be Jewish, regardless of whatever might be printed on the food wrappings regarding supposed official Iranian tolerance.

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